

Let

*The story of the Jewish people's
ascent to Eretz Yisrael,
from the Waters of Conflict
to the crossing of the Jordan*

My Nation

*A compilation
of Talmudic
and Midrashic
sources*

Ascend

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Waters of Conflict



After the incidents of the spies and Korach's rebellion, the Jewish people remained in Kadesh Barnea for a long time. It was a period of adjustment and adaptation to the new realities of life,¹ and Hashem allowed them to stay on for another nineteen years.² And then, early one morning, the people were surprised by the

1. Every Tishah b'Av night witnessed the sad spectacle of each man having to lay down in what threatened to become his grave, a painful reminder of past misdeeds and their consequences. See Rashi with *Sifsei Chachamim* and Mizrachi, *Devarim* 1:46; *Seder Olam* 9.

2. Together with the sixteen months they had been in the wilderness until then, the Jews had thus far spent more than twenty years there. Compare *Yalkut Me'or haAfeilah*, Ibn Ezra on *Bamidbar* 20:1. See also Rashi with *Sifsei Chachamim* and Mizrachi, *Devarim* 1:46; *Seder Olam* 9.

blaring of trumpets in the camp of Levi signaling that the encampment was about to relocate.

For the next nineteen years, the encampment moved on the average of once a year.³ From Chatzeiros, they traveled to Rimon-peretz, named for the abundant pomegranates to be found there.⁴ Then they traveled to Livnah, named for its brick (*leveinah*) boundaries,⁵ and then on to Risah and then Keheilasah⁶ and afterward to Har Shefer, a mountainous region blessed with beautiful fruits.⁷ From there they traveled to Charadah and then to Makheilos⁸ followed by Tachas.⁹ They then traveled to Tarach, followed by a place called Miskah, known for its sweet and fresh water.¹⁰ From Miskah they traveled to Chashmonah,¹¹ and from there to Moseiros, a place where the Jewish people faced rebuke and chastisement.¹²

3. See Rashi, *Devarim* 1:40.

4. *Targum Yonasan*, *Bamidbar* 33:18–19. Part if not all of the Paran wilderness was also known as Rismah, because—as Rashi notes—there the spies slandered Eretz Yisrael, and *Tehillim* 120:4 compares slander to the coals of *resamim* (broom trees).

5. *Targum Yonasan*, *Bamidbar* 33:20. All the following explanations are based on *Peirush Yonasan*, a commentary on *Targum Yonasan*.

6. According to Tur, *Bamidbar* 33:22, the name Keheilasah, literally “gathering,” alludes to Korach’s gathering his supporters against Moshe.

7. *Targum Yonasan*, *Bamidbar* 33:23.

8. According to *Targum Yonasan*, *Bamidbar* 33:24, the name Charadah, literally “trembling,” indicates a place where they trembled over a plague. As for Makheilos, “gatherings,” *Sha’arei Aharon* suggests that there they repented for the sins of Korach’s gathering. The words *charadah* and *charatah* (regret) are interchangeable.

9. According to *Targum Yonasan*, *Bamidbar* 33:26, Tachas, literally “below,” connotes the lowlands of Makheilos.

10. *Targum Yonasan*, *Bamidbar* 33:28.

11. *Tehillim* 68:32 and *Yehoshua* 15:27 detect here a possible origin of the Chashmonaim, the great priestly warriors who defeated the Greeks in the miracle of Chanukah. See Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, responsum 51.

12. *Targum Yonasan*, *Bamidbar* 33:30. Moseiros was named thus for the rebellious actions of the Jewish people upon their future returns to this place

They then traveled to Bnei-ya'akan, known for its narrow passageways, or narrow wells or pits,¹³ after which they moved to Chur-hagidgad, known for its mountains laced with cracks, crevices and clefts.¹⁴ Then they traveled on to Yotvasah, known for its flowing brook¹⁵ that made it a pleasant place to relax.¹⁶ From there, they traveled to Avronah, which was a river crossing.¹⁷ Afterward, they moved on to Etzion Gever, a city of either chickens or roosters.¹⁸

Finally, on Rosh Chodesh Nisan of the fortieth year of the Jewish people's sojourn in the wilderness, they arrived and settled in a place called Kadesh, in the wilderness of Tzin.¹⁹ There they would stay for four months.²⁰

By the time they arrived in Kadesh, all the people condemned to spend the rest of their lives in the wilderness had passed away.²¹ The remaining Jews were righteous, and living in unity and harmony.²² The latter would not discover that they had merited to enter the Holy Land until Tishah b'Av, when they would lie down

following the death of Aharon. ("Moseirah" derives from the word *musar*, rebuke. The Jews rejected rebuke, and as a result rebelled.) Malbim, *Bamidbar* 20:29, suggests that Aharon is buried here. See *Devarim* 10:6 and Rashi. See also *Devarim* 10:7.

13. *Targum Yonasan*, *Bamidbar* 33:31. These pits were dug by the children of Anak.

14. *Ibid.*, verse 32.

15. See *Devarim* 10:7.

16. *Targum Yonasan*, *Bamidbar* 33:33.

17. *Ibid.*, verse 34.

18. *Ibid.*, verse 35. The people there knew all about these fowl and may have even worshiped images of them.

19. See *Seder Olam* 9. According to Rabbeinu Meyuchas and Alshich, this was part of the wilderness located on the edge of Tzin, near the land of Edom.

20. See *Seder Olam* 9; *Chizkuni*, *Bamidbar* 20:1. Gra, *Seder Olam* 9, suggests that the Jews arrived on 10 Nisan.

21. See Rashi, Ibn Ezra on *Bamidbar* 20:1.

22. *Lekach Tov*, *Ohr haChaim* on *Bamidbar* 20:1; *Yalkut Shimoni* 763. See also Rashi, *Bamidbar* 20:1, 22.

in their graves and no one would die—but Moshe was already aware of it.²³

Miriam's Well Runs Dry

The thirty-eight years between Korach's rebellion and the Children of Israel's arrival in Kadesh were uneventful, in both a positive and a negative sense.

There were no more eruptions against Moshe and his authority. But there were also no more revelations of the Shechinah or prophecy to Moshe, because the divine anger did not completely subside as long as transgressors still lived.²⁴

On 10 Nisan,²⁵ shortly after the Jewish people's arrival in Kadesh, Miriam passed away at the age of 125. She was the sister of Moshe, a great prophetess in her own right, the charismatic leader of the Jewish women and an inspiration for all the Jewish people to serve Hashem with proper devotion.²⁶ Because of her supreme righteousness, she died via a divine kiss,²⁷ so to speak, by which the light of the Shechinah touches the person and painlessly draws out the soul from the body. Moshe and Aharon were the only two other people who passed away in this manner.²⁸

Rather than dishonor Miriam by carrying her through the wilderness until the Jewish people reached the Holy Land, she was

23. See Malbim, *Bamidbar* 20:1; Rashi, *Bava Basra* 121a. See also Rav Chaim Paltiel; *Chasam Sofer* 101.

24. Rabbeinu Bachya, *Bamidbar* 20:1; *Yevamos* 72a with Tosafos; *Pesikta d'Rav Kehana* 50b. According to Rabbeinu Bachya, *Devarim* 2:16, after Moshe mourned the final deaths on Tishah b'Av, Hashem revealed Himself to him on 16 Av. See *Tehillim* 95:10 with Radak.

25. *Seder Olam* 10; *Targum Yonasan*, *Bamidbar* 20:1.

26. See *Targum Unkelos*, Rashi on *Michah* 6:4; *Ralbag*, *Bamidbar* 20:1.

27. Rashi, *Bamidbar* 20:1; *Bava Basra* 17a.

28. See *Ben Yehoyada*, *Bava Basra* 17a; *Morech Nevuchim* 3:51. See also *Ohr ha-Chaim*, *Vayikra* 16:1, for his explanation of this "divine kiss."

buried in Kadesh, in a holy place with a holy name among holy people.²⁹

Miriam was an extraordinary woman, completely selfless and devoted to others. At great risk to herself, she helped save Jewish infants when Pharaoh decreed that they be cast into the river. When the infant Moshe was set afloat on the river, during that dreadful time, it was Miriam who lingered on the riverbank to insure that he was safe. She was always involved in various community activities and issues. She promoted family purity among the Jewish women, and she led them in song after the splitting of the sea.³⁰

It would have been appropriate for the Jewish people to react to Miriam's passing with a flood of tears and a public display of grief and mourning.³¹ They should have stood in line to offer their condolences to Moshe and Aharon, the grieving brothers.³² They should have organized gatherings and delivered glowing eulogies.³³ But they did none of those things. They just murmured their obligatory words of regret, and then they went on with their lives. The consequences of their lackadaisical attitude were not long in coming.

The people's water supply during their forty-year sojourn came from a miraculous well that accompanied them in the merit of Miriam.³⁴ It had appeared forty years earlier when the Jewish people encamped at Refidim had no water.

29. *Sifsei Kohen*, *Bamidbar* 20:1; *Eliyah Rabbah*, cited by *Torah Sheleimah*, *Bamidbar* 20:24. Until Moshe's death, this area near Edom was considered a part of Eretz Yisrael belonging to the tribe of Levi. See *Sha'arei Aharon*, *Bamidbar* 20:1; *Malbim*, *Bamidbar* 20:14; *Meshech Chochmah*.

30. See *Sifsei Kohen*, *Rabbeinu Bachya* on *Bamidbar* 20:2.

31. Alshich, *ibid.*

32. Abarbanel, *ibid.*

33. *Kli Yakar*, *ibid.*

34. See *Let My Nation Wander* (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 2012), p. 66 ff.

“Go to one of the stones,” Hashem had said to Moshe,³⁵ “and strike it with your staff. The very staff that transformed water into blood will now bring forth water from a rock.³⁶ But do not select the stone yourself. If you do, people might say you were drawing water from a hidden subterranean well, and you wanted to make it look like a miracle. Let the elders choose the stone, and you strike it. I assure you that whichever stone you strike will give forth water.”³⁷

Moshe struck the stone, and it did indeed give forth water. And from then on it accompanied the Jewish people in the wilderness and provided water for them.³⁸ Our Sages say that this stone had been prepared for this purpose from the time of Creation, and it gave forth its waters in Miriam’s merit.³⁹

When she passed away, however, the well ceased to provide water.⁴⁰ The Jewish people had failed to shed tears for her, and now the well refused to “shed” water for them.⁴¹ The merit of Moshe or Aharon could have restored the flow of water from the rock, but the Jewish people did not deserve it. And so, millions of Jewish people were left waterless in the barren wilderness.⁴²

35. Ramban, *Shemos* 17:5.

36. *Targum Yonasan*, Ramban, *Chizkuni*, Seforno on *ibid.*

37. See *Shemos Rabbah* 26:2 and commentaries.

38. See *Seder Olam* 10; *Ta’anis* 9a with Rashi; Rashi, Maharsha on *Shabbos* 35a; *Yalkut Shimoni* 764.

39. *Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer* 19. According to *Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer* 3 and Radal, this stone was created on the second day of Creation.

40. See *Shabbos* 35a; *Ta’anis* 9a; *Sifsei Chachamim*, *Bamidbar* 20:2. Miriam had merited this well by tending to the babies Pharaoh sought to kill (*Anaf Yosef*). Maharsha, *Ta’anis* 9a, says that although the well returned in the merit of Moshe and in theory should never have dried up, it ceased temporarily in order to show that the merit was originally Miriam’s.

41. *Toldos Yitzchak*, *Minchah Belulah* on *Bamidbar* 20:1–2. Some say there was water, but not for the Jewish people. The well didn’t dry up; rather, it was clogged (Alshich, *Bamidbar* 20:2).

42. See Tur, Malbim, *Sifsei Kohen* on *Bamidbar* 20:2.

Renewed Complaints

The people were distraught. They could not understand why the flow of water had ceased.⁴³ It seemed to them that even if Miriam was no longer alive, the water should continue to flow in the merit of Moshe and Aharon. It did not occur to them that they were responsible because of their failure to give Miriam the proper posthumous honor she deserved.⁴⁴ Following their usual practice, they decided to seek out Moshe and demand answers.⁴⁵

As the crowd approached Moshe's tent, Moshe and Aharon were sitting on the ground and mourning their deceased sister. "Look at that crowd, Aharon," said Moshe. "I wonder what they want."⁴⁶

"These are kind and charitable Jewish people," said Aharon, "descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. They are probably coming to console us."

Moshe shook his head. "It looks more like a mob to me. If they were coming to console us, the chiefs and princes would be leading the way. It looks to me like they're up to no good."⁴⁷

The mob gathered in front of Moshe's tent and called out the names of both Moshe and Aharon, but presently they calmed down a bit and directed their comments to Moshe alone.⁴⁸

"Why are you crying over your sister?" they asked.

"Because she died," replied Moshe. "We mourn the dead. Why shouldn't I cry over her? She was my sister and a great woman."

43. *Chizkuni*, *ibid.*

44. See Tur, Malbim, *Sifsei Kohen* on *ibid.* The Jews had also failed to emulate Moshe and Aharon. They neither learned Torah nor acted with kindness, through which they would have merited water (*Sifsei Kohen*).

45. *Minchah Belulah*, *ibid.*

46. *Midrash haGadol*, *Bamidbar* 20:3; *Midrash haBiur* 20:6.

47. *Yalkut Shimoni* 763. Compare *Yalkut Pisron Torah*.

48. *Lekach Tov*, Tur on *Bamidbar* 20:3. According to *Midrash haGadol* and Seforno, their complaints were directed toward Hashem as well.

“While you sit there crying for one woman,” they said, “you will soon be crying over many thousands. There is no water, and we are all dying of thirst.”

Moshe and Aharon investigated, and discovered that it was indeed true. The flow of water from the rock had ceased.⁴⁹

“It seems,” said Moshe, “that there is no water now that Miriam’s merit is no longer with us.”

“But what about your merit?” one of the men protested. “And Aharon’s merit? The two of you have provided us with the *mahn* and the cloud pillars. Why can’t you provide us with water as well?”⁵⁰

“We want you to help us, Moshe,” said another man. “We are dying of thirst, and we hold you responsible. It is because of you that we are here so deep in the wilderness.⁵¹ You could have prayed to Hashem to take us to the Holy Land by a shorter route.⁵² If you can’t provide us with water, why did you bring us here in the first place? Back in Egypt, we at least had abundant water. What good is freedom when you’re dying of thirst?”⁵³

“You know something,” said yet another man, “I’m beginning to envy those who died on Tishah b’Av after lying down in the grave.⁵⁴ I’m even beginning to envy Korach and his faction who were swallowed up by the earth,⁵⁵ or even those who perished in the plagues.⁵⁶ At least they died quickly, while we are condemned

49. *Midrash haGadol*, *ibid*.

50. See Tur, Malbim, *Kli Yakar* on *ibid*.

51. See *Ohr haChaim*, Alshich, *Akeidas Yitzchak* on *Bamidbar* 20:3–4. Because Aharon loved peace, the Jewish people vented their anger at Moshe alone (*Sifsei Kohan*).

52. See *Lekach Tov*, *Kli Yakar* on *Bamidbar* 20:3.

53. *Ohr haChaim*, Malbim on *Bamidbar* 20:4.

54. See *Lekach Tov*, Rokeach, Ibn Ezra, *Sifsei Kohan* on *Bamidbar* 20:3.

55. *Lekach Tov*, Rokeach on *ibid*.

56. Rashi, Malbim on *ibid*.

to a long and agonizing death by thirst.⁵⁷ In fact, I think it would have been better to drown in a sea of water, as the Egyptians did, than to die for the lack of even a drop of potable water.”⁵⁸

“I don’t understand,” said the first man. “In the past, when the Jewish people were sinners, the loss of water would have been understandable. But those people are basically gone, and our generation is righteous. Why have we been condemned to die of thirst?”⁵⁹

“Explain to us, Moshe,” said the second man who had spoken, “why you brought us out of Egypt to this barren wilderness.⁶⁰ When the well was giving water, the soil was irrigated and verdant with vegetation. We even enjoyed pomegranates and other fruits.⁶¹ Now we have nothing; no food, no water. We have been condemned to die.”⁶²

“Both people and animals are on the verge of death,” said a man who had been standing silently on the sidelines. “Are we guilty of something? Are our animals guilty of something?⁶³ Please enlighten us.”

Moshe and Aharon remained silent.⁶⁴ They recognized the justice of the complaints, and they were ashamed that they were unable to provide for their flock.⁶⁵ They saw the level of anger in

57. Rashi, *ibid.* *Minchah Belulah* adds that the Jews would rather have died at the hands of Hashem, as in the previously mentioned deaths, than due to Moshe’s inability to provide water.

58. *Toldos Yitzchak*, *Minchah Belulah* on *ibid.* According to *Yalkut Shimoni* 763, based on *Mishlei* 18:6, the Jews were foolish to utter this death wish.

59. Tur, *Bamidbar* 20:4; *Yalkut Shimoni* 763.

60. *Targum Unkelos*, *Bamidbar* 20:5.

61. See *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:26; *Shir haShirim Rabbah* 4:13. See also Tur, Rokeach, *Tzeror haMor* on *Bamidbar* 20:4. And see *Let My Nation Serve Me* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 2004), p. 95.

62. *Lekach Tov*, Rav Saadiah Gaon, Malbim on *Bamidbar* 20:5.

63. Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Bamidbar* 20:4.

64. *Lekach Tov*, *Bamidbar* 20:6.

65. *Sifsei Kohen*, *ibid.*

the crowd rising and feared the mob might turn violent.⁶⁶ Without saying a word, they made their way through the crowd and went to the Ohel Mo'ed,⁶⁷ where they prayed⁶⁸ for prophetic enlightenment.⁶⁹ It came almost immediately.

Speak to the Rock⁷⁰

“You have to serve the people, Moshe,” Hashem said to him. “Now is not the time to sit and mourn your sister. The people are suffering, and they cannot be faulted for complaining.⁷¹ Deal with them directly, and do not escape to the safety of the Mishkan. You are to draw water from the rock again.”⁷²

The previous time, back in Refidim, Hashem had instructed Moshe to have the elders choose the stone and to strike it with his staff. This time, it would be a different process. He was to assemble all the people in front of the stone and command it to resume giving water.⁷³

66. *Midrash haGadol*, *ibid*.

67. *Yalkut Shimoni* 763.

68. Rabbeinu Bachya, *Bamidbar* 20:6. Ralbag suggests that Moshe “prayed” to the Jewish people to stop complaining. See *Sefer halkarim* regarding the results of Moshe’s prayer.

69. Ibn Ezra, *ibid*.

70. This is a difficult story with many views of what took place and how Moshe and Aharon subsequently erred. I have followed primarily Rashi, *Bamidbar Rabbah* and *Yalkut Shimoni*. All text and commentary are to be found in *Bamidbar* 20:8–13 unless otherwise noted.

71. *Midrash haGadol*, *Bamidbar* 20:3; *Yalkut Shimoni* 763. According to *Minchah Belulah*, *Bamidbar* 20:6, rather than withdrawing, Moshe should have admonished the Jews and assured them that Hashem could solve their water problem. The ensuing solution would have been a *kiddush Hashem*. Instead, Moshe found himself positioned to transgress Hashem’s command by hitting the rock.

72. *Lekach Tov*, *Tzeror haMor*, *Sifsei Kohen* on *Bamidbar* 20:6. See Tosafos, *Yoma* 22b, s.v. *veha’amar*. See *Toldos Yitzchak* for a dissenting view.

73. According to *Bechor Shor*, this is nothing more than a more detailed re-counting of the incident that took place forty years earlier.

“Take your staff,” said Hashem,⁷⁴ “and speak to the same stone⁷⁵ in My Name. Tell the stone that I command it to give water,⁷⁶ and the streams will burst forth from it once again so that the people and their animals⁷⁷ can drink their fill. Do this in full view of all the people.”

Why did Hashem want Moshe to speak to the stone here, when earlier at Refidim He had instructed Moshe to strike the stone with his staff?⁷⁸ First of all, Hashem never repeats a miracle in an identical form. If the first time Moshe struck the stone, there had to be a variation the second time.⁷⁹ But there were also deeper reasons.

In those days, before the Jewish people had received the Torah, their faith was weaker. The spectacle of striking the stone and extracting water was a sufficient miracle to impress them and inspire them with awe. But now the people were on a much higher spiritual level, and they would have taken in stride the sight of

74. See *Targum Yonasan*; *Yalkut Shimoni* 763; *Zohar* 272a; *Lekach Tov*.

75. *Be'er Yitzchak*. According to Malbim, however, this was a different stone altogether. *Shemos* 17:6 refers to a *tzur*, a rock-solid stone that had to be struck to produce water. This stone, a *sela*, was softer, stored rainwater in its cavities, and therefore needed only to be spoken to. Yet releasing water from such a stone simply by addressing it is no less miraculous than producing water from a *tzur*.

Be'er Mayim Chaim mentions that *sela* is spelled samech, lamed, ayin, and the middle letters of these words spell *mayim*, water.

76. See *Targum Yonasan*; *Lekach Tov*. The water was still there, just blocked. Moshe had only to command the stone to unseal itself. See *Yalkut Pison Torah*.

77. Hashem's concern for the Jews' livestock showed that He cares about Jewish property (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:9).

78. *Ha'amek Davar* states that Hashem wanted Moshe to speak to the stone in order to teach the Jewish people the fundamentals of prayer. When there is no rain, one must pray. In the absence of sacrificial offerings, one prays. Now too, lacking water, Moshe was to pray—and the stone would then bring forth water.

79. *Lekach Tov*, Rokeach. Hashem drowned the generation of the flood in rain and the Egyptians in the sea. He sweetened bitter water, then surpassed that by producing drinking water from a rock. By failing to speak to this rock, Moshe lowered the level of the miracle, and that was his sin.

Moshe striking the rock and water gushing forth. They needed a greater miracle to make their eyes open wide with wonder and awe; they needed the stone to produce water with nothing more than an oral command.⁸⁰

Alternatively, before the Jewish people had received the Torah, they were comparable to a child that needs to be disciplined by his parents with an occasional slap. Likewise, the nation in its infancy needed to see the symbolic spectacle of Moshe striking the stone. But once the Jewish people had coalesced into a mature nation, there was no longer any need for such symbolism. Oral guidance was sufficient.⁸¹

Be that as it may, although Hashem instructed Moshe to speak to the stone, He still wanted him to bring his staff.⁸² The staff had wrought miracles in the past, as when the Jewish people had battled Amalek,⁸³ and its mere presence would also be effective.⁸⁴ Furthermore, when the stone saw the same staff that had extracted water from it forty years earlier, it would obey Moshe's command.⁸⁵

According to another view, Moshe was to bring Aharon's staff rather than his own,⁸⁶ because the former had sprouted blossoms and almonds. When the stone would see that a dry wooden staff could produce almonds when commanded to do so, the dry stone would give forth water when it was so commanded.⁸⁷

80. See *Sefer haIkarim*; *Panim Yafos*.

81. See *Yalkut Shimoni* 763; *Tosefos Rabbeinu Yoel*; *Yalkut Midrash Teiman*; Alshich. See also *HaKesav vohaKabbalah*. See *Chasam Sofer* 103 for a similar insight. According to *Ha'amek Davar*, Moshe was supposed to have taught the Jews a word or two of Torah, then have them pray for water, just as one prays for rain. But he failed to do that.

82. *Lekach Tov*.

83. *Ma'aseh Hashem*. See *Let My Nation Serve Me*, p. 120.

84. Alshich.

85. *Me'am Lo'ez*. The staff signified that the Jewish people deserved to be chastised for their rebelliousness (*Chizkuni*; Rashbam).

86. Rashbam; *Chizkuni*; *Panim Yafos*; *Chasam Sofer*.

87. See *Kli Yakar*; *Panim Yafos*. The words *eitz* (wood) and *sela* (stone) have the

Moshe did as Hashem had instructed. He took the staff and went to the spot where he thought the stone was situated.⁸⁸

More Dissension

Moshe assembled all the people around the stone he had identified as the source of the water. Hashem wanted every Jew to be an eyewitness to the miracle that was about to happen,⁸⁹ and therefore, miraculously, every single one of the people was able to stand within four *amos* of the stone⁹⁰ with an unobstructed view of the proceedings.⁹¹

“What is going on here?” one man scoffed. “Are we about to witness a miracle involving a stone that Moshe has chosen? I’m not impressed. The son of Amram is an experienced shepherd. He knows how to find subterranean springs and bring forth their water. This won’t be much of a miracle, more like a sleight-of-hand. If he wants to impress us, he should let us select the stone from which he will extract water. After all, if it’s a miracle he intends to perform, what difference does it make if it’s this stone or another?”⁹²

Moshe turned and saw that the people had indeed gone off to find stones of their own. In fact, men from each of the twelve tribes were pointing to stones they had chosen for the miracle.⁹³

Moshe was angry. Hashem had specifically instructed him to approach the stone that had served as the original Well of Miriam.

same numerical value (170). *Panim Yafos* adds that it would have been a greater miracle to use Moshe’s dry staff than Aharon’s moist, flowering one. According to Rashbam, Moshe took Aharon’s staff because its miraculous sprouting of almonds recalled the Jews’ previous disputes (i.e., Korach’s rebellion).

88. *Lekach Tov*.

89. Ramban; *Bechor Shor*; *Hadar Zekeinim*. The miracle would show that the Shechinah was among them.

90. Alshich. See Rashi, *Vayikra* 8:3.

91. See Rashi; Tur; *Midrash haGadol*; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:9; *Tanchuma*, *Chukas* 9.

92. *Yalkut Shimoni* 763; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:9.

93. *Yalkut Shimoni* 763; *Midrash haGadol*.

Could he disregard his instructions and go instead to a different stone chosen by the people? But on the other hand, if he disregarded their wishes, the credibility of the miracle would be undermined. And what would happen if he spoke to the wrong stone and it did not respond? That would certainly be an embarrassment. No, the safest course of action was to do exactly as Hashem had instructed regardless of the skepticism of the scoffers.⁹⁴

For forty years, Moshe had assiduously distanced himself from the misdeeds of the people. He had never sinned or otherwise transgressed, and he thought he was protected from the decree that all the Jewish men except for Yehoshua and Kalev were to die in the wilderness. He had worried about the omission of his name in that context, but he was hopeful nonetheless. But the predicament he was now facing was more complicated, and he did not manage to extricate himself safely.⁹⁵

“Listen to me, you rebels,”⁹⁶ he called out to the people milling about. “Do you think you’re worthy of miracles?⁹⁷ Do you really think I’ll be able to bring forth water from any of these stones⁹⁸—other than from the one regarding which Hashem commanded me? Do you think you can identify the stone Hashem has chosen? Fools! Only Hashem can bring forth water from a stone, and I swear that the only water brought today from a stone will be the one of my choosing.”⁹⁹

94. *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:9.

95. *Ibid.*, with Mahrzu, Radal.

96. Moshe called the Jews rebels because, rather than complain, they should have prayed, knowing that all their needs would then be met (*Bechor Shor*). Alternatively, they were rebels because they slandered Hashem and quarreled about water (*Matnos Kehunah*; Mahrzu). Compare Malbim.

97. Alshich.

98. Some say the Jews misunderstood Moshe. They thought that, rather than posing a rhetorical question, he was stating, “I will bring water from these stones.” When he failed to do so, the Jews therefore lost some of their faith in Hashem’s powers (*Midrash Aggadah*). See Ibn Ezra.

99. See *Yalkut Shimoni* 763; *Lekach Tov*; *Midrash haGadol*; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:9;

Moshe Hits the Stone

While Moshe was chastising the people, the designated stone rolled away into a field of identical stones.¹⁰⁰ Moshe followed the stone, but by mistake, he settled on the wrong one.

“Give forth water!” he commanded the stone.¹⁰¹

No water came forth, because unbeknownst to Moshe, it was not the stone to which Hashem had commanded him to speak. Unaware that he had spoken to the wrong stone, Moshe began to have second thoughts about what he was supposed to do. Perhaps he hadn’t been meant to speak to the stone at all. Perhaps he was just supposed to strike it, just as he had done forty years before in Refidim.¹⁰²

Another thought occurred to Moshe. Perhaps the stone had not responded to him because the people had scoffed at him and thereby disqualified themselves from witnessing a miracle of the highest order. Perhaps they did not deserve to witness anything more than water emerging from a stone that had been struck.¹⁰³

Rashi; Rokeach; *Da’as Zekeinim*; *Bechor Shor*.

100. Hashem orchestrated this complication because Moshe had gotten angry and verbally attacked the Jewish people. *Midreshei haTorah* says that because Moshe became angry, he forgot where the correct stone was.

101. Rashi. *Tzeror haMor* adds that only after they saw Moshe searching for the designated rock did the Jews demand that their own rocks be used, as they were thirsty and couldn’t wait any longer.

102. Rashi; *Midreshei haTorah*; Riva. Some say Moshe believed that the stone could give water via a verbal command only in the Shechinah’s presence. Earlier, among the elders, the Shechinah was present. Now, however, amidst all these rebels, it was absent, so the only way to produce water was to hit the stone. See *Panim Yafos*.

103. Alshich; *HaKesav vahaKabbalah*. According to *Tzeror haMor* and Malbim, Moshe meant that, as rebels, the Jews didn’t deserve miracles. Yet Hashem works wonders for the wicked as well, if only to show them His mighty hand and sanctify His Name. Moreover, adds Alshich, the fact that originally the people had all miraculously fit in front of the stone was proof enough that they were worthy of miracles. Perhaps Moshe felt that the Jews had forfeited that merit by arguing further. Perhaps he considered them worthy of lesser miracles. Whatever Moshe’s rationale, Hashem considered it an error in judgment. See *Chasam Sofer* 107.

But there was no time to speculate. The people needed water.

Moshe lifted his staff and struck the stone.¹⁰⁴ A liquid came forth, but it wasn't water; it was blood. The staff that in Egypt had transformed the waters into blood had now brought forth blood instead of water from the stone.¹⁰⁵

The people recoiled. "Blood!" they shouted. "Do you expect us to drink blood?!"¹⁰⁶

Hashem stanchd the flow of blood, and instead, a tiny trickle of water emerged from the stone.¹⁰⁷ At this point, Moshe should have suspected that he had addressed the wrong stone, but he did not.¹⁰⁸

"Moshe," said the scoffers, "do you expect to sustain the people with those few drops of water? This might be enough for an infant or two, but what about the millions of people who are thirsty for water?"¹⁰⁹

104. Moshe thought that both speaking to and hitting the stone were necessary (*Ohr haChaim*). See Rokeach.

105. See *Targum Yonasan*; *Yalkut Shimoni* 2:819; *Midrash Tehillim* 78. See also *Shemos Rabbah* 3:13. According to *Chupas Eliyahu* and Malbim, after the stone bled, Moshe objected that no water had come out. Then Hashem commanded the stone to produce some. (This interpretation doesn't minimize Moshe's transgression in hitting the rock.)

Shemos Rabbah 3:13 notes that Moshe had come full circle. At the burning bush, he had said the Jews wouldn't have faith in his message, and that necessitated the sign of blood—to be produced through the staff. Now, that same staff had drawn blood from the stone, and this had minimized Jewish faith. Furthermore, this blood portended that Moshe's striking the stone would lead to his death. All this sheds new light on *Tehillim* 114:8, "[Hashem] turned the rock into a pool (*agam*) of water." The word *agam* has the same numerical value (44) as the word *dam*, blood. Thus, the verse can be understood as, "[Hashem saw to it that Moshe] turned the rock into a flow of blood" (Rabbeinu Bachya).

106. *Midrash Tehillim* 105.

107. See *Me'am Lo'ez*.

108. Rashi with Mizrachi; *Chizkuni*; Riva. *Midrash Aggadah* suggests that initially Moshe placed his staff on the stone. "Seeing" Hashem's Name engraved on the staff, the stone began dripping water. Only after Moshe actually hit the stone did water gush forth.

109. *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:9.

Moshe was humiliated. He was determined to bring forth abundant streams of water from the stone to slake the people's thirst.¹¹⁰ He raised his staff to strike the stone once again, and at that moment, the designated stone rolled back to where he was standing and resumed its rightful position.¹¹¹ Moshe brought the staff down onto it with a sharp blow. Immediately, a river of water erupted from the stone, sweeping away the scoffers who had spoken disrespectfully to Moshe.¹¹² And then, to the utter amazement of the people, all the stones in the field gave forth heavy streams, providing more than enough water to satisfy one and all.¹¹³

Moshe and Aharon Are Punished

The incident was over. The people had all the water they needed, but Moshe had failed an important test. Hashem told

him to speak to the stone, and he had mistakenly struck it.

How could Moshe have made such an error? He knew the staff was only supposed to have a symbolic presence at the miraculous event, that it was not meant to be the instrument of its execution. So why did he use it?¹¹⁴

Moshe's grave error in judgment began well before he hit the rock in anger.¹¹⁵ Anger causes people to err, and even Moshe fell

110. *Midrash haGadol*. See *Chizkuni* regarding how Moshe was to extract water from the stone.

111. Rashi with *Mizrachi*; *Midrash Aggadah*; *Midreshei haTorah*.

112. According to *Yalkut Reuveni*, when Moshe hit the rock the first time, he did so with the dry side of the staff. The second time, he used the side bearing Hashem's Name, and then the rock gave water.

113. *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:9; *Midrash Aggadah*; *Rabbeinu Bachya*; *Midrash Tehillim* 78; *Yalkut Me'or haAfeilah*. As before, twelve streams spread across the camp, heading toward each tribe's encampment.

114. *Mizrachi*.

115. See *Gur Aryeh*; *Midreshei haTorah*; *Ha'amek Davar*. These suffering, thirsty Jews deserved the benefit of the doubt, not anger. Moshe's wrath thus made him a poor emissary of Hashem. That alone desecrated Hashem's Name and

victim to its consequences. When he allowed himself to become angry, he lost himself momentarily and struck the stone with his staff, and then he compounded his error by striking the stone a second time.¹¹⁶

“Because you struck the stone instead of speaking to it,” said Hashem, “you have diminished the miracle I performed for the people, and thereby you have reduced the amount of faith the people would have derived from it had it been performed as I intended. If you had drawn water from the stone merely by speaking to it, it would have sanctified My holy Name among the people. They would have said, ‘Here is a stone that neither speaks nor hears, that receives no reward or punishment for its actions, and still it obeys Hashem’s commandment. Surely we, the living servants of Hashem who constantly need assistance, must fulfill His will and obey His commandments.’¹¹⁷ Moshe and Aharon, because you failed to sanctify My Name, I swear you will both lose the opportunity to enter the Holy Land.¹¹⁸ Instead, you will both die in the wilderness because of your transgression.”¹¹⁹

warranted punishment. See *Midrash haGadol*; Rabbeinu Bachya; Rambam, *Shemonah Perakim* 4.

116. Mizrachi.

117. Rashi; *Midrash Aggadah*. Additionally, if Hagar had miraculously received water from a well in the merit of Avraham, surely the Jewish nation was worthy of receiving water through the hand of Hashem in the merit of the patriarchs (*Yalkut Shimoni* 763; *Sifsei Kohen*).

118. While both the spies as well as Moshe and Aharon died in the wilderness, their circumstances were quite different. The spies were punished with death; Moshe and Aharon were punished with not entering Eretz Yisrael and only consequently did they perish in the wilderness. Alternatively, both the generation of the wilderness and Moshe were punished for lacking faith, or causing such a lack (Malbim).

119. Rashi; Rabbeinu Bachya. See *Devarim Rabbah* 11:10. *Imrei Shefer* explains that Moshe couldn’t pray his way out of this decree, because someone who desecrates Hashem’s Name is denied the ability to repent (*Yoma* 86a). Alternatively, Moshe and Aharon were held to a far stricter standard than the rest of the Jews: Hashem scrutinized their actions meticulously and punished them severely (*Midrash Petiras Moshe*, cited in *Otzar Midrashim* 375).

“If I have sinned,” Moshe responded, “what has Aharon done? Why should he lose the opportunity to enter the land? He is not the one who became angry or struck the stone. It was I.”

“He should have stopped you,” said Hashem. “He should have protested. He is responsible, because he was silent when he should have spoken.”¹²⁰

Moshe and Aharon did not sin against Hashem directly: they just failed to bring about a sanctification of His holy Name. Ordinarily, Hashem might forgive such a failing. Nonetheless, He held Moshe and Aharon accountable. This showed the people that everyone must suffer the consequences of their actions, even someone as great as Moshe about whom Hashem said, “He is trusted in My entire House.”¹²¹ Moshe’s punishment sanctified the Name of Hashem by demonstrating that no one is exempt from responsibility.¹²²

Other Views on Moshe’s Transgression

The following are a number of other opinions regarding the nature of Moshe’s transgression.

- ◆ Hashem had only instructed Moshe to assemble the elders as witnesses to the miracle, and on his own accord, Moshe had invited all the people, including the Eirev Rav.¹²³
- ◆ Moshe should not have insisted on speaking only to the stone he himself had identified. This raised doubts about

120. See *Lekach Tov*; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:9; *Imrei Noam*. Even in punishment, however, Aharon is praised for his silence: rather than defending himself or questioning Hashem’s justice, he simply accepted His decree (*Mahrzu, Matnos Kehunah*).

121. *Bamidbar* 12:7.

122. See Rabbeinu Bachya; *Yalkut Shimoni* 764; *Ma’aseh Hashem*. In fact, one reason this place was called Kadesh was that Hashem was sanctified through His judgment of Moshe and Aharon. See Rashbam; *Chizkuni*; Alshich.

123. Tur; Rokeach. See Rabbi Yehudah heChasid for a dissenting view.

the authenticity of the miracle in the minds of the people. In actuality, Hashem would have accommodated Moshe's decision regardless of which stone he chose, just as He had accommodated Moshe's idea of having the earth swallow up Korach and his faction. Had Moshe issued the command to any stone suggested by the people, he would have sanctified the Name of Hashem. His failure to do so was a missed opportunity, and he was held responsible.¹²⁴

- ❖ Moshe should not have interrupted his mission in order to reprimand the people. Instead, he should just have spoken to the rock without the slightest delay.¹²⁵
- ❖ Moshe was not careful to avoid giving the people the impression that he was going to extract water from the stone by his own power rather than as an agent of Hashem. Aharon should have been sensitive to this possibility as well, and since he did nothing to dispel such a possible impression, he was also held responsible.¹²⁶
- ❖ Moshe should not have lost his temper and called the Jewish people rebels and fools, which was unbecoming for some-

124. *Midrash haGadol, Lekach Tov, Tzeror haMor*. See *Ohr haChaim, Ma'aseh Hashem*. By asking the people if they believed he would extract water from their stone, Moshe unwittingly created the impression that he couldn't, and that Hashem couldn't either. This question thus diminished the nation's faith and desecrated Hashem's Name. Nonetheless, Malbim writes that Moshe would have been forgiven if he hadn't erred a second time by hitting the rock, in addition to using his own rock instead of one chosen by the people.

125. *Tosefos Rav Ephraim al haTorah*. Compare *Sefer halkarim*.

126. Rabbeinu Chananel; Rabbeinu Bachya; Rokeach; *Da'as Zekeinim; Tosefos Rav Ephraim al haTorah*. This impression was created either because Moshe said, "We [Moshe and Aharon] will bring forth water," or because he and Aharon left Hashem out of their statement. *Tzeror haMor* and Ibn Ezra add that Moshe created the impression that he would produce water from the stone because he knew how, not because Hashem can do anything. This failure to depict Hashem as the source of the miracle was the root of Moshe and Aharon's transgression.

one of his stature.¹²⁷ Had he controlled his angry reaction he would have sanctified the Name of Hashem, and therefore, he was held responsible for his failure to do so.¹²⁸

- ❖ Moshe was punished for both degrading the level of the miracle and reprimanding the people with harsh language. Had he not spoken harshly to the people, Hashem would have forgiven him for his failure to speak to the stone.¹²⁹
- ❖ Moshe should have hit the stone only once. He was held accountable for striking it a second time.¹³⁰
- ❖ According to one view, Moshe's period of mourning for Miriam had caused a reduction in Torah among the Jewish people, and therefore, the well had ceased to give forth water. Had Moshe taught some Torah to the Jewish people, the situation would have been rectified, and the water would have begun to flow.¹³¹

Beginning with the rebellions at the sea and continuing with the bitter waters at Marah, crises involving water had been a recurring feature of the Jewish people's experience in the wilderness. Therefore, regardless of the specifics of his transgression, Moshe should have been more sensitive to the nuance of the situation when a new crisis involving water arose.¹³²

127. *Pesikta d'Rav Kehana* 14; *Devarim Rabbah* 2:8. See *Devarim Rabbah* 2:2; *HaKesav v'ehaKabbalah*.

128. See Rambam, *Shemonah Perakim* 4; *Derashos Rav Yehoshua ibn Shu'iv*. See also *Bereishis Rabbah* 99:5. Additionally, the Jews might have presumed that Moshe couldn't have gotten angry unless Hashem was angry too. Since no anger was warranted, it was a desecration of Hashem's Name that they thought Hashem had wrongfully become angry (*Midrash haGadol, Bamidbar* 20:24).

129. See *B'Shem Omro*.

130. Abarbanel. Another view suggests that Moshe was to use the staff only if the stone wouldn't bring forth water. Moshe spoke to the wrong stone, however, so hitting it was a sin. See *Targum Yonasan*.

131. See *Yalkut Shimoni* 763; *Ha'amek Davar*.

132. *Ma'aseh Hashem, Bamidbar* 27:14.

The Impact of the Transgression

Earlier, when the complainers wanted meat, Moshe came close to questioning Hashem's ability to provide for their desires, and

yet the Torah does not tell us that he was chastised and punished for his remarks.¹³³ Why then does the Torah take Moshe to task for his failure to only speak to the stone, a transgression that doesn't seem to rise to the level of his remarks regarding the complainers?

It is because those remarks were made in private, and therefore, Hashem was more tolerant of them. This transgression, however, took place in full public view, and it gave the impression that Hashem could not have drawn water from the stone if Moshe had done no more than speak to it. Therefore, Moshe was punished.¹³⁴

Once Moshe learned that he would not be allowed to enter Eretz Yisrael, he requested from Hashem that the Torah publicize the reason for it. Since he knew he would die in the wilderness, he did not want suspicion to fall on him that he was complicit in the sin of the spies and that he had been punished along with them. Instead, he wanted the reason spelled out clearly in the Torah.¹³⁵

The Torah therefore makes it very clear that Moshe was denied entry into the land for this reason alone.¹³⁶ Hashem made sure

133. See *Let My Nation Wander*, p. 96 ff. See also *Bamidbar* 11:22.

134. Rashi; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:10. In the case of the meat, questioning Hashem's ability was an outright desecration. In the case of hitting the stone, Hashem's Name was still sanctified, just not at its highest level—and yet Moshe was punished. See *Nachalas Yaakov*; *Maskil l'David*.

135. Rashi; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:12, 27:13; *Yoma* 86b.

136. See Rashi with *Be'er Yitzchak*, *Mesiach Ilmim* on *Bamidbar* 27:13; *Sifrei* 137; *Vayikra Rabbah* 31:4. Moshe's defenders would have said, "Had Moshe been guilty of the same crimes as the spies, he would have died along with them." The cynics would have argued that Moshe was already over the age of sixty and hence excluded from the forty-year decree of death. Thus, while he didn't die with them, he was guilty of the same transgression, and hence not allowed to enter Eretz Yisrael. To avoid this argument, Moshe asked that Hashem publicize his sin.

that Moshe's punishment was limited to this and that there were no other consequences. It would not besmirch his reputation.¹³⁷

According to some views, the incident of the Eigel was a factor in the premature death of Aharon, who had played an indirect part in it, and the incident of the spies was a factor in the premature death of Moshe, who had made the decision to send them. Since the people were doomed to die in the wilderness, Hashem did not want their leaders to enter without them. The Midrash compares this to the king's shepherd who loses his flock. The king does not allow him into the city until the sheep are found.

Similarly, Hashem did not want the leaders of the doomed people to enter the land without them. At the same time, He did not want it to seem as if they were implicated in those crimes. Therefore, He waited until the incident with the stone and used this rather minor transgression as a pretext for barring them from the land, a decision that had already been predetermined almost forty years before. In the future, after the resurrection of the dead, those who were doomed to die in the wilderness would return to life, and Moshe would lead them into the Holy Land.¹³⁸

The place where this incident happened came to be called Mei Merivah, Waters of Conflict. It was where the Jewish people came into conflict with Moshe when they entertained some doubt about the legitimacy of his actions.¹³⁹ It was also a conflict with Hashem, because any conflict with Moshe, Hashem's loyal servant, was by

137. *Tosefos Rav Ephraim al haTorah; Moshav Zekeinim.*

138. *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:13 with Mahrzu. See Abarbanel and Malbim here and on *Devarim* 10:6. See also *Shabbos* 55b for an apparently different view.

In fact, this incident involves one of six sins for which Moshe was held accountable while leading the Jewish people (*Tanchuma, Va'eschanan* 6).

According to Rabbeinu Bachya, back in the days of Avraham, Hashem foreshadowed this episode by naming its location Ein Mishpat, "Spring of Judgment," for the justice Hashem was to execute on Moshe. See *Bereishis* 14:7.

139. Malbim.

extension a conflict with Hashem.¹⁴⁰ In another sense, the waters themselves were part of the conflict, since it was unclear which stone would produce the water.¹⁴¹

Many years before, Pharaoh's stargazers had foretold that the downfall of the Jewish redeemer would be through water. They believed they could effect this by throwing all male babies into the river, but Moshe survived those waters. His downfall came through the Waters of Conflict, which led to his being denied entry into the Holy Land and his premature death.¹⁴² Nonetheless, although Moshe knew that his time was limited and that he would not accompany the people into Eretz Yisrael, he continued to lead them with undiminished devotion and enthusiasm.¹⁴³

140. *Sanhedrin* 110a.

141. *Nachalas Yaakov*; Alshich.

142. Rashi; *Lekach Tov*.

143. Rabbeinu Bachya; *Tanchuma, Chukas* 12.