

# Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

## Chukat

*G-d said to Moshe: "Take the staff, assemble the congregation... and speak to the rock... You will bring out water from the rock and supply the people and their cattle." Moshe took the staff that was before G-d, as He commanded him (20:7-9).*

But Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it. Thus he was informed by Higher Authority that he would not bring the Israelites into the Promised Land.

Yet on a similar occasion when the Israelites faced a shortage of water, G-d actually told Moshe to take the staff and hit the rock (Sh'mot 17:5-6). This time - some forty years later - G-d did not tell Moshe to hit the rock, but to speak to the rock.

In that case, why did He tell Moshe to take the staff that was 'before G-d'? Staffs don't help people to talk.

The Kli Yakar holds that the staff that was 'before G-d' was not Moshe's, but Aharon's. This was significant. After the revolt of Korach, Aharon's staff blossomed flowers when the staffs representing the other tribes did not (Bamidbar 17:23). G-d then ordered Moshe to place Aharon's staff in the Holy of Holies, as a warning to those might incite rebellion in the future (17:25-6). And just as G-d could make

flowers blossom out of a staff, so could He bring water out of the rock.

That gave background to what followed. Aharon himself was a person of peace and strove to achieve results by peaceful means: "He loved peace and he pursued peace, he loved people, and would bring them close to the teachings of the Torah" (Avot 1:12). For that reason, G-d instructed Moshe not take his own staff that he used to strike the Nile and bring forth blood, but the staff of Aharon, placed in the Holy of Holies. As an instruction to Moshe: to be like Aharon. Approach like Aharon: love peace and pursue peace. Achieve your aims peacefully. Lead the people with just enough persuasion to be effective. Speak to the rock, not strike the rock as last time. Speak to the rock.

But Moshe did not. He did exactly what he had done 40 years earlier. As then instructed. He struck the rock. But times had changed since there. He was now leading a new generation.

The Ohr HaChayim develops the importance of taking a new approach. He points out that the Torah opens the story by calling the Israelites KOL HA-EIDA, literally "the whole assembly". The Ohr HaChayim interprets that entire expression to mean that at that moment all the Israelites were upright, worthy people. As Rashi explains, the generation sentenced to die in the Wilderness had already passed on. Those present included the people who would enter the

Land. They were not the same individuals that Moshe led out of Egypt and troubled him with their complaints, grumbles, and happenings, including the golden calf and the spies. The people he was now leading were not answerable for the sins of their fathers. In addition, following Miriam's death, the Israelites were short of water. They complained: "Why have you brought us... to this evil place... there is no water to drink?" This, the Ohr HaChayim suggests, was a legitimate complaint, even if put indelicately and with more provocation than necessary. Why not follow a route to the Promised Land that did have water on the way?

With this background, the Ohr HaChayim considers that addressing the assembled Israelites: "Pay attention, you rebels!" indicated a lack of respect for the people he was leading. It was a new generation. Possibly he was angry at the way they expressed their fears of dying of thirst: "If only we would have perished before G-d, as happened to our brothers." In any case, these - unlike the previous generation - were people who then had an unblemished record of cooperation and good deeds.

"Pay attention you rebels!" was not the leadership frame for addressing the situation. Names stick: people don't forget them. He should have handled the situation with the qualities of his brother Aharon: "loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and bringing them

close to the teachings of the Torah". According to the way G-d instructed him: by speaking to the rock. Not by battering it.

G-d was effectively telling Moshe that the generation now before him would be receptive to a gentle approach, not the more military one that justifiably characterized his effecting Y'tzi'at Mitzrayim and all that followed in that generation. Moshe, however, admittedly under pressure, chose to stick to the tried and tested methods that he knew, rather than adapt his style to suitably lead a very different generation. It was thus time for someone new and in tune with those people to succeed to the title role. Thus, later on, G-d told Moshe to appoint Yehoshua to lead the people.

