

Temple Beth Am Torah Study
Rabbi Jaime Aklepi

Chukat, Numbers 19:1-22:1
July 5th, 2025

Set what we have said, against what has already been said about it, and let the truth have its way. (Maimonides)

Read verses 20:1-5, “The community was without water...” 20:2

The Women’s Commentary

without water. Is the timing of the present complaint for water significant? Miriam is closely associated with water: she observes the deliverance of Moses from drowning in the Nile (Exodus 2:1–9), and she celebrates with him at the sea (Exodus 15:20–21). Right before she dies, new ritual instructions require “water of lustration” that is made from “living water” (Numbers 19). And now, immediately after Miriam’s death, the people desperately cry for water. Because the two episodes follow each other sequentially, the Rabbis explicitly connect Miriam’s death to the lack of water. The linkage suggested to the midrashic imagination that she was the source of the water now gone.

Rabbeinu Bahya (14th c)

ולא היה מים לעדה, “The congregation had no water.” As soon as Miriam died, the well which had traveled with the Israelites all these years ceased providing water. The water which the people had enjoyed all these years was due to the merit of Miriam who had stood by watching what would happen to her infant brother when he was in a basket in the reeds at the edge of the river (Exodus 2,4). G’d had rewarded her for that act of kindness by making her the provider of water for Moses’ people. The people had not appreciated this until the well ceased with Miriam’s death.

Read verse 20:6

וַיָּבֹאוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן מִמִּצְוֵי הָעֵדָה אֶל-פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל-פְּנֵיהֶם וַיֵּרָא כְבוֹד-יְהוָה אֲלֵיהֶם: {פ}

Moses and Aaron **came away from** the congregation to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and fell on their faces. The Presence of יהוה appeared to them,

Ibn Ezra

AND MOSES AND AARON WENT FROM THE PRESENCE OF THE ASSEMBLY. Like those who flee.

Nechama Leibowitz

“Ibn Ezra comments that Moses and Aaron came before the assembly ‘as fugitives’ instead of sanctifying the name of God and showing initiative. There was no greater desecration of God’s name than this.”

Read verses 20:7-13

Ibn Ezra

I will reveal in hints the explanation which appears correct to me. Know, when the part knows the All, he cleaves to the All and creates signs and wonders with the help of the All. Now it is true that God told Moses and Aaron, *Speak ye unto the rock*. They did not speak to the rock because the people were quarreling with Moses. The “part” thus remained a “part.” He struck the rock, and water did not come out of it until he struck it a second time. Moses and Aaron thus did not sanctify God’s name. They inadvertently rebelled and trespassed. It is also possible to explain that *And he spoke rashly with his lips* (Ps. 106:33) refers to Moses. It was unseemly for Moses to say anything before fulfilling God’s command. Moses was therefore punished. The midrashic interpretation of our ancients, of blessed memory, who said that Moses sinned because he said, *Hear now, ye rebels* (v. 10) is also in keeping with this interpretation. The rabbis hint at this secret.

Ramban

In this section Nachmanides reviews many of the commentators' answers to the question: “What was Moses’ Sin?” I am sharing some of it below:

Rashi’s Answer

The sin of Moses and Aaron in the [matter of the] waters of Meribah is not clearly expressed in Scripture. **Rashi** explains that [their sin consisted of hitting the rock], because He had commanded them, *and speak ye unto the rock*, and did not say “and ye shall strike it.” For had they spoken [to the rock and it had brought forth water] the Holy One, blessed be He, would have been sanctified before the whole congregation, since the people would have said: “If [even] this rock, which does not hear and does not speak, nonetheless obeys the command of the Holy One, blessed be He, how much more so should we [obey His commands]!” These words are [in the nature of] a homiletic interpretation, but they do not clarify [the matter]. For since G-d had commanded Moses: *Take the rod*, it implied that he *should* smite [the rock] with it, for had He only wanted that he should speak to it, what was [the point of] this rod in his hand?

Rambam’s Answer

Now Rabbeinu Rabbi Moshe [ben Maimon] advanced the following reasoning, and explained “that the sin of Moses our teacher, of blessed memory, consisted of tending towards anger, when he said, *Hear now ye rebels*, and G-d, blessed be He, treated this as a failing, that a man like him should show anger in front of the congregation of Israel, in a situation in which anger was not warranted. All similar actions of such a man are treated as a profanation of G-d’s Name, because the people take an example from all his [Moses’] movements and words, hoping thereby to achieve successes in this world and the World to Come. How could he [permit himself to] appear angry, since it [anger] is an evil trait, and is derived only from a bad characteristic of the features of the soul!

Rabbeinu Chananel's Answer

The most likely explanation amongst all those that have been said about this matter, and the one best suited to answer a questioner, is that of Rabbeinu Chananel, who wrote [in his commentary] that the sin consisted of their saying, *are 'we' to bring you forth water out of this rock?* They should [not have said “are we”, but] “shall the Eternal bring you forth water?” just as they had said *when 'the Eternal shall give' you in the evening flesh to eat* etc., and similarly in [the case of all the] miracles they [Moses and Aaron] informed them that the Eternal would do wonders for them. And [since they did not say so here], perhaps the people thought that Moses and Aaron brought forth the water for them out of the rock through their own wisdom [and that it was not a Divine miracle]. This is [what G-d referred to in saying], *ye sanctified Me not*. Now in the case of the first episode with the rock, He said, *Behold, I will stand before thee there upon the rock in Horeb*, and the seventy elders saw the pillar of the cloud hovering over the rock, and thus it was made apparent to all that the miracle was the deed of the Great G-d. But here, since the people saw nothing, they misunderstood the words of Moses and Aaron [as explained above].

And [according to Rabbeinu Chananel's explanation, the criticism that] *lo he'emantem bi* (*ye believed not in Me*) refers [not to Moses and Aaron *themselves* lacking in belief, but] to the children of Israel [i.e., it does not mean, as it is generally translated, “ye believed not in Me,” but **“ye did not cause the children of Israel to believe in Me' because you did not attribute to Me the bringing forth of the water from the rock”**]. Or [the word *he'emantem*] may mean “strengthening,” as if to say: “you did not strengthen yourselves to sanctify Me in their eyes,”

Tze'enah Ure'enah (17th c. Yiddish work) on 20:13

“Through which He affirmed His sanctity” [20:13]. The Holy One was sanctified because Moses and Aaron died, since the evildoers would see that the Holy One does law and justice with the righteous and pious. How much more so with the evildoers. (Based on the Rashi)



Alex Aklepi