

Hitting the Rock: An Example of the Blame Game?

R. Yaakov Bieler

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As was pointed out in the previous week's essay on Parashat Devarim, "Getting the Story Straight",^{1[1]} many events and Commandments that first appear in the earlier books of the Tora, are repeated during the course of the book of Devarim. Of particular interest are reprises of Moshe's own actions—how they are described during the objective narration of the Tora in the books of Shemot through BaMidbar, as compared to the contents in Devarim wherein Moshe himself^{2[2]} presents his perspective on his behavior, the reasons motivating that behavior, and the responses that his behavior elicited in others, including HaShem.

A fascinating example of this type of dual perspective focuses upon Moshe's transgression that leads to the Divine Decree preventing him and Aharon from entering the land of Israel. The story line in Parshat Chukat provides the following information:

BaMidbar 20:7-12^{3[3]} (coming after a querulous complaint from the people that they lacked water to drink)

And HaShem Spoke to Moshe Saying:

Take the staff and gather the assembly together, you and Aharon your brother and speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will bring forth its water. And you shall bring forth to them water out of the rock and you will cause the congregation and their beasts to drink.

And Moshe took the staff from before HaShem, as HaShem had Commanded him.

And Moshe and Aharon gathered the congregation together in front of the rock and he said to them, "**Hear now, you rebels! Shall we get you water out of this rock?**"

And Moshe lifted up his hand, and with his staff **he hit the rock twice**, and the water came out abundantly and the congregation drank as did their animals as well.

And HaShem Spoke to Moshe and Aharon: **Because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel**, therefore you shall not bring the congregation to the land which I have given to them.

The text seems to lay the blame for God's Pronouncement that Moshe and Aharon are not to enter Canaan exclusively upon the two brothers in general, and Moshe in

^{1[1]} The essay focused upon the differences between the origins of the idea to send spies into Canaan in the accounts that appear in BaMidbar 13 and Devarim 1. It can be found at <http://kmsynagogue.org/Devarim2.html>

^{2[2]} As noted in last week's essay, I am assuming the postulate of Abrabanel (see his introduction to Devarim) that **Sefer Devarim** reflects **Moshe's own words**, Approved by HaShem for inclusion in the Tora. To assume that Moshe is simply vocalizing a Divine Script in the fifth book of the Tora would eliminate the possibility of comparing "objective" and "subjective" accounts of the same circumstance.

^{3[3]} For a discussion regarding the exact nature of Moshe's sin, see "Being Sorely Challenged to Keep the Faith" at <http://kmsynagogue.org/Chukat.html>

particular,^{4[4]} whether in terms of his having spoken disrespectfully to the people (v. 10) or hitting the rock (v. 11) resulting in a failure to properly “sanctify HaShem’s Name” (v. 12).

Yet, a careful reading of his statements in Devarim raises the possibility that Moshe believes that rather than he and Aharon alone, the Jewish people were also somewhat complicit in this particular Divine Decree.

Devarim 1:37

Also against me HaShem was Angry **“BiGlalchem” (because of you)** Saying: You also will not come there (to Canaan).

Ibid. 3:26

But HaShem was Angry with me **“LeMa’anchem” (because of you)** and would not Hear me...

Ibid. 4:21

And HaShem was Angry with me **“Al Divreichem” (because of your matters/words)** and Swore that I should not go over the Jordan and that I should not go into that good land which the Lord your God Gives you as an inheritance.

Furthermore, a source in Psalms, according to at least one reading,^{5[5]} seems to support the statements in Devarim, as opposed to what we originally read in BaMidbar:

Tehillim 106:32-33

“VaYaktzifu” (And they angered **him/Him**^{6[6]}) at the waters of Meriva, so that it went ill with Moshe **“Ba’avuram” (because of them)**.

^{4[4]} While the Divine Decree applies to both Moshe and Aharon (v. 12), the singular verbs in v. 9 “VaYikach” (And he took), v. 10 “VaYomer” (And he said), and v. 11 “VaYarem” (And he raised); “VaYach” (And he hit) suggest that the key actions that precipitate the Decree are all carried out specifically by Moshe.

^{5[5]} Tehillim supports the text in Devarim when Tehillim 106:32 is interpreted that it is Moshe who originally became angry, which then led him to speak improperly to the people, “because of them”, i.e., had they not spoken so harshly to him prior to God’s Instructions concerning the rock (BaMidbar 20:2-5), Moshe would not have become upset, and as a result, would not have lost control over how he addressed them. However, if 106:32 is understood as connoting HaShem becoming Angered with the people, then the verse in Psalms could be interpreted as explaining that the reason why God was unwilling to Allow Moshe to enter the land was due to His Discontent with the people. It was because of them, the people, that it eventually went badly for Moshe because God was Displeased with Them.

^{6[6]} The ambiguity in the verse, and therefore for our purposes in this discussion, is generated by the possessive pronoun contraction at the end of the word “VaYaktzifu” (him/Him). Whom did the people’s actions cause to become angry—Moshe or HaShem? Generally, in order to clarify such an ambiguity, one first looks at the rest of v. 32, the verse in question. The fact that Moshe’s name is mentioned in the next phrase—“...So that it went ill with Moshe ‘Ba’avuram’ (because of them)”—and it is Moshe who is being discussed in the following verse, v. 33—“...because they angered **his** spirit so that **he** spoke rashly with **his** lips”—a reference to BaMidbar 20:10—would support the reading that the first phrase is also referring to Moshe.

However, an alternate conclusion can be reached when one seeks out the relevant subject in the previous verses that the antecedent of “VaYaktzifu” might be referencing, i.e., in this case starting with v. 24.

Tehillim 106:24-29

Moreover they despised the pleasant land, they believed not **His** Word.

But murmured in their tents and did not listen to the Voice of the **Lord**.

Therefore **He** Lifted up His Hand against them, swearing to cause them to die out in the desert.

“Ki Himru Et Rucho” (**Because they angered his spirit**^{7[7]}) and he spoke rashly with his lips.

One question that arises when we assume that the people also precipitated HaShem’s Decision to not allow Moshe and Aharon to cross the Jordan is why in Devarim^{8[8]} was Moshe not ready to take complete responsibility for his transgression at Meriva, first described in BaMidbar 20?

Furthermore, in keeping with the view that a turnabout takes place from BaMidbar to Devarim regarding Moshe’s understanding of the sequence of events that led to the sending of the spies,^{9[9]} wherein Moshe originally attributes the plan to HaShem, but in retrospect realizes that it was his and the people’s fault, wouldn’t it be expected that Moshe in BaMidbar originally “blames” the people for his shortcoming, but now in Devarim comes to grips with how he alone should shoulder the burden for incurring God’s Wrath with regard to the tantrum that resulted in he and Aharon’s being barred from entering Canaan?

One way to explain Moshe’s apparent emphasis in Devarim on the role that the people played in his personal transgression is to recall that this final book of the Tora is dedicated in large part to Moshe’s rebuking the Jewish people for past shortcomings in anticipation of his imminent death and change in leadership.^{10[10]} Whereas the people might not care very much about the sins that Moshe and Aharon committed on their own, when the Jews hear that it was at least to some extent their fault that these leaders could not enter Canaan, they might take to heart to try to avoid similar confrontations in the future with Yehoshua and those who would follow him. Such a depiction of the sin at Meriva in Devarim would then be intended to maximize the rebuke to the Jewish people inherent within the incident and parallel the manner in which the decision to send the spies is described in Parshat Devarim,

To Cast out their seed among the nations, and to Scatter them in the lands.
Then they joined themselves to Ba’al Pe’or and ate the sacrifices of the dead.

Thus they provoked **Him** to anger with their deeds, and the plague broke out upon them.

Since Moshe’s name is not mentioned until the **middle** of v. 32, it is reasonable to assume that the antecedent of the pronoun in the first part of this verse is a continuation of the references to HaShem that mark the preceding verses.

^{7[7]} Whereas the meaning of “VaYaktzifu” is patently unclear, the phrase describing the angering of “his” spirit which in turn led to rash speech can hardly be attributed to HaShem, but rather unambiguously refers to Moshe’s harangue in BaMidbar 20:10. MaLBIM and Da’at Mikra on Tehillim 106:33 suggests a second possibility, i.e., that the people angered God Who Swore to treat Moshe badly, the verbal outburst being God’s (BaMidbar 20:12 “And **HaShem Spoke** to Moshe and Aharon...”) rather than Moshe’s.

I suppose a third possibility would entail splitting the verse and interpreting the first part referring to HaShem (they caused Him to become angry) and the second part describing the resulting action by Moshe (and he spoke rashly). But I find this last approach highly unlikely, although it could be said to parallel II Shmuel 24:1, or the number of times that God Hardens Pharaoh’s heart in Shemot, causing these people to do things that contribute to their respective personal undoing. I find it hard to understand why God would Force an individual to sin and then Punish him for that sin without stating that this is due to some prior unpunished transgression. As long as it is not necessary to draw such a conclusion, it is preferable to follow the more logical first or second explanations.

^{8[8]} Since from the introduction of Tehillim 106—v.1: “Halleluka. Give thanks to HaShem because He is Good, for His Kindness if forever”—there is no indication of authorship on Moshe’s part (in contrast to 90:1 “A prayer of Moshe, man of God...”), the only way that the authorship of Tehillim 106 could be said to be by Moshe would be an extension of the Baraita appearing in Bava Batra 14b-15a: “David wrote the book of Tehillim by means of 10 Elders: Adam, Malki Tzedek, Avraham, **Moshe**...” Assuming that Moshe is not the author of this Psalm, then it must be concluded that the Psalmist was influenced by the references in Devarim more than by what is stated in BaMidbar concerning the causes of the Divine Decree prohibiting Moshe and Aharon from entering Canaan.

^{9[9]} See <http://kmsynagogue.org/Devarim2.html>

^{10[10]} See the classical commentaries on Devarim 1:1.

i.e., God essentially had nothing to do with it; it was Moshe and the people's plan and they have to therefore live with the consequences of the spies' report.

However, on closer inspection, the contexts of the **three verses in Devarim** do **not appear to call attention** to the **same specific malfeasance** on the part of the people that is discussed in BaMidbar 20. Preceding Moshe's harsh words and violent act in Parshat Chukat, the people's pointed challenges, and therefore their alleged contribution to Moshe's sins, are recorded as follows:

BaMidbar 20:2-5

And there was no water for the congregation. And they gathered themselves together against Moshe and Aharon.

And the people quarreled with Moshe and they said, saying: If only we had died together with our brothers who died before HaShem.¹¹[11]

And why have you brought up the congregation of HaShem into the desert? That we and our cattle should die there?

And why have you made us come up out of Egypt? To bring us to this evil place? It is not a place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates. Nor is there any water to drink!

If these are the comments that Moshe is referring to when he states that it was due to the people and their angering and frustrating him that he was ultimately unable to enter the land, then why with regard to **Devarim** does this remark follow a review of the **sin of the spies**?

Devarim 1:34-36

And HaShem Heard the voice of your words (in your tents after the report of the spies) and He was Angry, and Swore, Saying:

Surely not one of these men of this evil generation shall see that good land that I Swore to Give to your fathers.

Except for Kaleb, son of Yefune, he shall see it and to him I will Give the land that he has walked upon and to his children, because he has wholly followed HaShem.

The objective account in the Tora text appears to significantly separate the sin of the spies (BaMidbar 13) from that of Moshe and Aharon sin at Meriva (BaMidbar 20). Why does Moshe treat these two events as if they were cause and effect?

Furthermore, the verses preceding **Devarim 3:26** follow upon a description of Moshe's Imploring HaShem to Allow him to enter the land.

Devarim 3:23-25

And I prayed to HaShem **at that time** saying:

O HaShem, You have Begun to Show Your servant Your Greatness and Your Mighty Hand. What god is there in the Heavens and on earth that can do according to Your Works and according to Your Might?

¹¹[11] **Daat Mikra on BaMidbar 20:3**

Not only does death itself generate fear in them, but especially dying of thirst. For this reason they say: If it has been decreed that we are to die, we would prefer to die in the manner that our brothers died. Their intent appears to be to refer to those who died during the Korach rebellion, whereby (BaMidbar 16:38) "A fire went out from HaShem, and it consumed the 250 men"; (Ibid. 17:11) "And the anger went out from before HaShem"...

I pray You, Let me go over and see the good land that is beyond the Jordan and the goodly mountain region and Lebanon.

No mention of such a prayer appears in BaMidbar, leading us to speculate when it might have originally taken place—when exactly was “at that time”? While it is logical that Moshe would have prayed for permission to bring the people to Canaan immediately after the Divine Decree in BaMidbar 20:12, traditional commentators on **Devarim 3:26**, due to the juxtaposition of the phrase “BaEit HaHie” (at that time) on the heels of Moshe’s description in Devarim of the **acquisition of the land** upon which **Reuven, Gad and ½ of Menashe** desired to settle,^{12[12]} posit that this prayer was offered by Moshe after the conquest of the Kings Sichon and Og (BaMidbar 21). If Moshe’s prayer took place at the end of the 40 year period, why is he continuing to attribute God’s Insistence that he not enter Canaan to what the people had done so long ago, when those people had all died out by this time!?

And as for **Devarim 4:21**, here again what is being discussed is the **receiving of the Tora**^{13[13]} as well as the **prohibition against idolatry** that grows directly out of that experience,^{14[14]} an event first described in Shemot 19. Why revisit the Divine Decree against Moshe and Aharon that happened more than a year later (following the construction and dedication of the Tabernacle) and associate it with HaShem’s Giving the Tora to the Jews?

12[12] **Devarim 3:18-22**

And I commanded you (Reuven, Gad and ½ of Menashe) **at that time** (the identical terminology as in Devarim 3:23) saying: HaShem, your God, has Given you this land to possess it. Pass over (the Jordan) armed before your brothers the children of Israel, all that are fit for war.

But your wives and your children and your herds, for I know that you have many herds, shall live in your cities which I have given you.

Until HaShem Gives rest to your brothers and to you, and until they also possess the land that HaShem, our God has Given them beyond the Jordan, and then shall you return every man to his possession, which I have given you.

And I commanded Yehoshua at that time saying:

13[13] **Devarim 4:11-20**

And you came near and stood under the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven with darkness, clouds and thick darkness.

And HaShem Spoke to you out of the midst of the fire; you heard the Voice of the words, but saw no form, only a Voice.

And He Declared to you His Covenant that He Commanded you to perform: the Ten Words, and He Wrote them on two tablets of stone.

And HaShem Commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments that you might do them in the land which you go over to possess it.

Take therefore good heed to yourselves, for you saw no manner of form on the day that HaShem Spoke to you in Chorev out of the midst of the fire.

Lest you become corrupt and make a carved idol, the likeness of any figure, the likeness of male or female.

The likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air. The likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the waters beneath the earth.

And lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun, the moon, the stars, all the host of heaven, you should be misled to worship them and serve them, which HaShem your God has Allotted to all the nations under the whole heaven.

But HaShem has Taken you and Brought you out of the iron furnace, the land of Egypt, to be to Him a people of inheritance, as you are this day.

14[14] Just as there was no visual experience of God at Sinai, this should teach that HaShem is never to be represented by any image or figure.

An approach that will take into account all of these questions and that contains a **deep lesson not only for Moshe**, but also for future leaders of **Israel**, appears in the Midrash on the verses in BaMidbar where the Divine Decree is first Delivered:

BaMidbar Rabba 19:13

"The Holy One, Blessed Be He, Said to Moshe"—On what basis do you request to enter the land?

A parable regarding a shepherd who went out to herd the king's flock and the flock was captured. The shepherd requested to enter the king's palace. The king said to him: If you come in now, what will people say? You were the one who was responsible for the herd being captured (because if you really cared about the herd, you would be trying to free them rather than think about your own comfort).

Here too, the Holy One, Blessed be He, Said to Moshe: Is it your praise that you brought out 600,000, buried them in the desert and bring in a different generation into the land? Now people will say that the generation of the desert has no portion in the World to Come. Rather stay at their side and come with them (at the time of the Resurrection of the Dead),^{15[15]} as it is said, (Devarim 33:21) "...He came with the heads of the people. The righteousness of HaShem he carried out." For this reason it says (BaMidbar 20:12) "You will not bring this congregation", but rather they will go out with you (from the desert in the future).

Two commentators rely on this Midrash in order to interpret the terminology, "**BiGlalchem**", "**LeMa'anchem**", "**Al Divreichem**" and "**Ba'avuram**".

Chizkuni on Devarim 3:26

"But HaShem was Angry with me '**LeMa'anchem**' (for your **benefit**)—The Holy One, Blessed be He Said to Moshe: If you cross into the land, they will say that that which was Decreed concerning the generation of the desert regarding their not entering the land of Israel, is because they have no portion in the World to Come. And if by means of your prayer you enter the land, they will say that Moshe was only concerned about himself. Rather be buried among them and bring them with you in the Future, that is what is meant by (Devarim 33:21) "He came with the heads of the people".

Ohr HaChayim on Devarim 3:26

...Or if you wish you could interpret it in the following manner: "But Hashem was Angry with me" and Required me to die outside of Israel "**LeMa'anchem**" in accordance with the known meaning, in order that they will stand with him (Moshe) in the World to Come...and for this reason the verb is precisely used "VaYitaber", a language of "Evra" as in Tzephania 1:15 "That day is a day of 'Evra' (wrath)...", i.e., that it is a day of death. And he said, "He would not Listen to me", because HaShem did not Wish Moshe to enter the land in any way, even on condition that he would leave the land afterwards. But rather he is to be buried in that place where the multitude of the generation of the desert were buried...

^{15[15]} See Sanhedrin 91b on the verse in Shemot 15:1.

Consequently, rather than blaming the people for his inability to enter Israel, Moshe is telling them that his dying and remaining behind, at least for the short term, is indicative of HaShem's Concern for the welfare of His Chosen People, even those whose lack of faith consigns them to dying during the 40 years of wanderings following the Exodus. "For your sakes"; "Because of you"; "Due to your affairs/best interests" HaShem Insists that I remain on this side of the Jordan, because that is what leadership entails, sacrificing for the good of the totality rather than the pursuit of self-interest. Therefore it does not matter what the topic is that Moshe finds himself discussing with the people; the point is always the same, i.e., HaShem is Teaching me that I must lead by example and faithfully carry out my responsibilities to all of you, regardless of your shortcomings and sins, including even preceding generations. It seems that HaShem by not Permitting Moshe to go into Israel, was continuing to **affirmatively** answer his humble servant's question: (BaMidbar 11:12) "Did I conceive this people, did I give birth to it so that You can Say to me: Gather them up to your bosom in the manner in which the nursemaid gathers up the baby, on the land that You Swore to our fathers?" In order that the lesson that leaders do have to "indulge" their "children" the good together with the wayward, is passed on to the ensuing generations, Moshe reiterates this theme several times at the outset of his valedictory in Parshiot Devarim and VaEtchanan.

Shabbat Shalom, and may there speedily be Shalom on all of Israel.
