

## PARSHAT CHUKAT: WHY DID MOSES HIT THE ROCK?

This guide corresponds to the video: [Why Did Moses Hit The Rock?](#)

### SABBATH TABLE OUTLINE

I. This week's parsha contains one of the most perplexing stories in the Torah

- a) The people are thirsty, and there is no water
  - 1. Moses turns to God for help, and God tells Moses to speak to the rock, and water will come out
  - 2. Instead Moses hits the rock
  - 3. Moses can no longer go into the land of Israel
- b) Why such a drastic consequence was inflicted upon Moses for such a misdeed is one of the great mysteries of the Torah
- c) Just as much of a puzzle as why Moshe was punished in such a way is why he hit the rock in the first place
  - 1. God said speak to the rock, so why didn't he?
  - 2. Why did he insist on hitting the rock?
  - 3. The answer to that is tied up in some mysterious way with an introductory verse that we often ignore



II. The people came to the wilderness of Zin, and Miriam died and was buried there (Numbers 20:1)

- a) This verse seems to come out of the blue because the next verse talks about how there was no water for the people to drink (Numbers 20:2)
  - 1. Rabbi Fohrman says it's an intro because the Torah characterizing it that way
  - 2. The "I" that starts verse 2 seems to connect the events that go forward (lack of water for the people) with the events that just took place
- b) What does Miriam's death have to do with the fact that there's no water here?
  - 1. Could Miriam's death be the precipitating factor to there being no water here?
  - 2. As it turns out, that's how the Midrash understands it

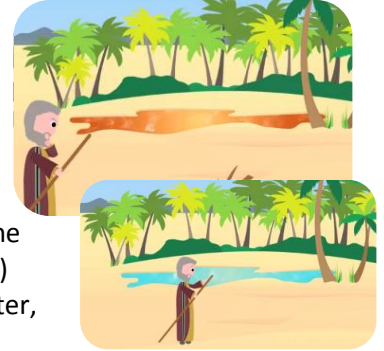


III. To see how this is so, keep in mind that if you survey the entire travels of the people of Israel through the wilderness, you will find three water crises

- a) The very first water incident takes place just after Israel comes out of Egypt and crosses the Sea of Reeds
  - 1. Right then, the text tells us that they went for three days in the desert and couldn't find water (Exodus 15:22)



2. Ultimately this water crisis gets solved when God pointed out a stick to Moses
3. Moses threw it in a bitter water, and miraculously made it sweet



- b) Now in the next water crisis, things appear to be even more desperate

1. Moses complains to God that the people are going to stone him because they are so desperate for water (Exodus 17:4)
2. God tells Moses to hit a rock, and the rock will give its water, and that's what happened



- c) Crises one and two both occur right when you would expect them to

1. Water crisis one happens three days after the splitting of the sea
  - How long can you go without water? About three days
  - That's about when the people would have been really thirsty
  - And, in fact, there's a water crisis where you would expect there to be one
2. A few days later, whatever water they'd saved is now gone, and there's water crisis two right where you'd expect it to happen

- d) Now, fast-forwarding to water crisis three, in this week's parsha

1. It's now 40 years later
  - The people are on the cusp of coming into the land
  - Where did they get water for the last 40 years?
2. The Midrash, quoted by Rashi, says that until now, they didn't have a problem with water because they had Miriam's well
  - The rock that was hit in water crisis two never stopped giving water
  - It was a portable source of water
  - It stopped after Miriam dies, right before water crisis three
3. You see hints of this when God tells Moses to take his staff and speak to the rock (Numbers 20:8)
  - If you think about it, this sounds ridiculous
  - If God tells Moses to speak to the rock, how is he supposed to know which rock to speak to in the desert surrounded by rocks?
    - Of course there is "the rock"
    - The rock that's been providing water until now
  - Speak to the rock, and it will provide water
    - In the past, you hit it
    - Now speak to it



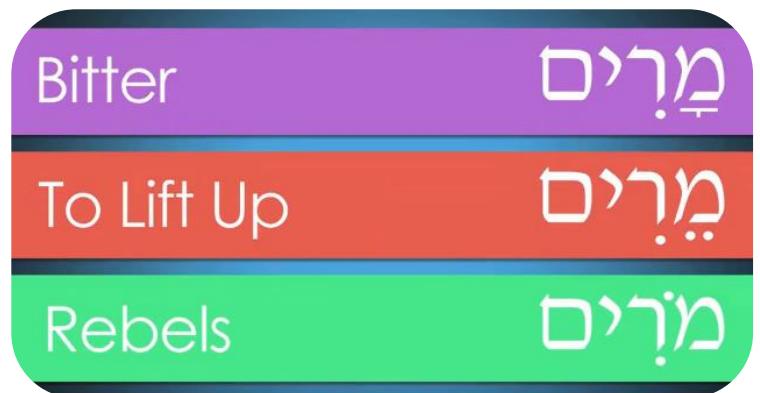
- IV. What exactly the difference is between speaking to the rock and hitting the rock is something Rabbi Fohrman talked about last year - For now, focus on Miriam's role in all of this
- a) Why was there a well during Miriam's time?

- b) What does Miriam have to do with wells?
- c) What does Miriam have to do with water?
- d) The mystery deepens when we take a minute to pause and look at how Miriam is connected to these three water crises
  1. As we've just seen, she dies in the verse before water crisis three
  2. Now, thinking about water crisis one, in the verse before that is when Miriam sings her song
  3. Just before water crisis one, Miriam sings her song, and just before water crisis three, Miriam dies
- e) In water crisis two, the rock that Moses hits becomes Miriam's well



- f) Miriam's connection runs deeper - Take Miriam's name and remove all vowels - מרים

1. Three Hebrew words can be spelled out of these letters:
  - Bitter
  - To lift up
  - Rebels
2. Where do these words show up?



- During water crisis one, they couldn't drink the water because it was bitter (Exodus 15:23)
  - During water crisis three, right before Moses hits the rock, he lifts up his hand (Numbers 20:11)
  - When he speaks to the people, he calls them rebels (Numbers 20:10)
3. Every possible permutation of Miriam's name shows up in the water crises
    - In the first one, Miriam sings
    - In the last one, Miriam dies
    - In the middle one, her rock becomes a well

- g) Miriam is everywhere in these water crisis stories - why?



- v. To really understand Miriam's connection to these water crises, look at Miriam's broader connection to water itself

- a) That takes us all of the way back to the beginning - We meet Miriam at water
  1. Egyptians were casting Jewish infants into the Nile
  2. In desperation, the mother of Moses puts him in the Nile, by some reeds
  3. When that happened, it was Miriam who stood and watched and ultimately intervened with the daughter of Pharaoh
  4. At the Nile, his sister saved him
- b) Suggest that it wasn't just at the Nile that Miriam saved Moses
  1. Miriam is always saving Moses
  2. The next time it happens is at the Sea of Reeds
  3. If you look carefully, you'll find something remarkable about the salvation of Israel at the Sea of Reeds - It all happened before

- What happened at the sea was just a larger version of what once happened at the Nile
- At the Nile, one child, Moses, was threatened by one Egyptian, Pharaoh, by a small body of water, a river, and there were a few reeds there
- Later on, that body of water would be an entire sea, and there wouldn't be a couple of reeds
- There would be a whole sea full of reeds
- And it wouldn't just be one Egyptian and one person from Israel
- It would be an entire army of Egyptians threatening an entire nation of Israel



- c) That would happen at the splitting of the sea
1. Just as Miriam was there the first time, so would she be there the second time
  2. Just as Miriam stood and watched with faith that it was going to work out, so too, the people at the sea watched
  3. It's the same words
  4. Moses tells them to stay and watch and have faith that it would work out
  5. Miriam taught them how to do this through her example at the Nile - See last year's Beshalach video



- d) If you would have asked Miriam, why she was watching and what her plan was, Miriam would say that she doesn't know what is going to happen, but just because she doesn't know what is going to happen doesn't mean there is not a plan

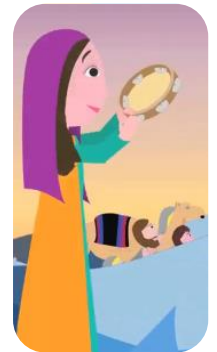
1. There is a Master of the universe, and He has a plan greater than can be imagined

2. At the sea, Moses said to stand and watch

- That is what Miriam did
- That is why, when the people do have faith, the sea splits
- Miriam sings her song
- She taught everyone how to do this
- Of course she's going to sing
- One more time, she saves Moses
- This time, the entire people along with him

3. It's not just these two times

- Later, there will be a water threat again to Moses
- In the second water crisis, Moses says that the people are so desperate that they are going to stone him alive
- God says relax; it's going to be okay
- He tells him to hit the rock, and that rock becomes Miriam's well
- Miriam saves him one more time



- VI. For 40 years, Miriam's well sustains everyone, but then she dies, and the water that had been there so faithfully is gone too

- a) Suddenly, the people are plunged into a great crisis that they haven't seen for years
- b) Facing her withered stone that had provided for them for so long, Moses speaks



1. Rebels, do you really think we'll get water from this rock? Numbers 20:10
2. מרים - It's as if he's talking to his dead sister
  - Miriam, you really think we can get water from this rock? Without you?
  - When Aaron dies later, the people mourn
  - When Moses dies later, the people mourn
  - When Miriam dies, the people don't mourn, they are plunged into crisis!
  - They don't have the luxury of mourning
  - There is no water
  - Maybe there is one person who mourns - her brother
  - It leads him to strike the rock
3. To try to go back to a time when Miriam was alive back at the second water crisis when he was commanded to strike the rock
  - When Miriam was there
  - But Miriam is not there anymore, and God asks Moses to have faith
  - That's what God says to Moses when He tells him that he cannot go into the land

- c) Why was it a matter of faith?

1. Hitting the rock or speaking to the rock - what's the difference?
2. It was an issue of faith
  - God was asking Moses to just have faith
  - He didn't even have to do anything
  - You cannot hit a rock
  - That only works in Miriam's world, but she is gone now
3. God was saying that you cannot artificially replicate a world in which Miriam is there
  - Miriam is gone, but you can learn what it is that she taught
  - She taught that when you cannot figure out what to do, and all of the options that you know of don't work, God can introduce an option that you never dreamed about
    - Moses looks at the situation, and none of the options work
    - How are you going to get water in the desert?
  - Either the people have extreme faith and put themselves in God's hands, but they are not doing that
    - Or, somehow, Miriam can carry them on her back
    - If Miriam is around, then so is her well
    - Miriam can get the water in her merit
    - But Miriam is gone
  - There are no other possibilities, but God says that there is another possibility
    - Even without Miriam and even without the people's faith, as long as Moses believes, it will work out



- Just talk to the rock
- It doesn't make any sense, but it doesn't have to make sense to Moses quite yet
- It's the option that Moses couldn't even imagine - faith in God
- This is where Moses failed
- In the end, Moses didn't have that faith

VII. In mourning, we tend to want to recreate the times when our loved one was still with us

- It cannot be recreated - the harsh reality is that they are gone
- You can take what they taught you and move forward
- Miriam and her well had one last lesson to teach - how to get water
  - Moses, in mourning for his sister, can't see it
  - One of the themes we've discussed in the last few weeks is mourning
    - The aftermath of the sin of the spies seems to be bound up in mourning
    - The same for the sin of Korach
    - Ironically, perhaps, the same here for Moses himself



- Mourning inspires deeply felt feelings of loss and anger
  - Those feelings are one thing, but when we take irrevocable actions in the midst of heartbreak, danger lurks there
    - It was true for the people after the sin of the spies
    - It was true for Korach
    - It may even have been true for Moses himself
  - It became the great tragedy of a rock that was struck and a leader who couldn't enter the land

