



RABBI SHALOM

ROSNER

Rav Kehilla, Nofei HaShemesh
Maggid Shiur, Daf Yomi, OU.org
Senior Ra"m, Kerem B'Yavneh

Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick

In Parshat Chukat we encounter the episode of Mei Meriva, where Moshe is punished for the way in which he dealt with the nation. The *mefarshim* argue as to what exactly was Moshe's transgression. Rashi suggests that Moshe **hit** the rock although he was instructed to speak to the **rock**. The Rambam zones in on Moshe's unjustified anger at the people. שמתנו נא המרים. The Ramban notes Moshe's words נוציא לכם מים which may be understood to connote that Moshe and Aharon were performing magic to extract water from a stone. There are various other explanations as well (See Shalom Rav).

Let's focus on Rashi's interpretation, which seems to be based on the simple reading of the text. Moshe was instructed ודברתם אל הסלע לפנייהם – “*Speak to the rock before their eyes*” (Bamidbar 20:8). The Menachem Tzion posits that the crucial lesson that Hashem desired to have Moshe transmit to the people was the **power of speech**. As the

Kuzari cites, the difference between man and animal is the ability to speak. Man is a *medaber*. What got the people of this generation in trouble in the midbar was primarily their speech. They complained endlessly about the lack of food and water, Korach's accusations, the spies false testimony, to cite some examples. This was an opportunity to highlight to the nation that speech should not be taken lightly. Look what one can accomplish with proper speech. One can even obtain water from a rock.

Rav Chanan Porat in Me'at Min Haor adds an interesting insight. This is a new generation, as the individuals who left Egypt died in the desert. The previous generation that experienced slavery, grew up in an environment where through physical force one is able to accomplish an objective. The new generation that is about to enter the land of Israel (this is in the 39th year), needs to understand that through **speech** rather than force one can achieve desired results. This is an essential message to a group of individuals that are on the verge of founding a country and building its infrastructure and culture.

Perhaps that is why Moshe was asked to carry his stick (טה) although he was not to use it. As Theodore Roosevelt said: “Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far.” This was the message God desired to be transmitted to the nation and it got convoluted. One can use physical might, but the

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preferred manner to accomplish a goal is through speech.

The message of the power of speech may not have successfully been conveyed to that generation, but it should resonate to our generation as well. We should be careful with our speech, realizing how we can hurt and offend someone with it. Today, included in the definition of speech is not just the oral word, but the written word as well, especially with the proliferation of social media platforms. Speech can also have a positive impact and we should use it more often to express gratitude, appreciation or even just a quick hello to a spouse, child or friend.

May we internalize this lesson from Mei Meriva and be careful with what “flows” from our mouths so that all of our communication is conducted in a positive and constructive manner. ■

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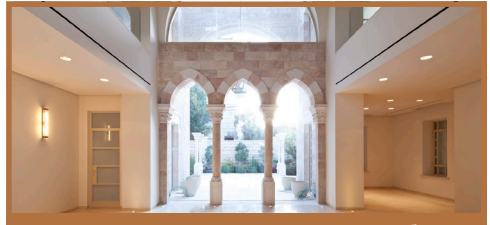
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