



Parashat Chukat  
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In a famous passage in his *Shemoneh Perakim* (chapter 4), Maimonides advances a novel approach in explaining the puzzling incident of *Mei Meriva*, which the Torah tells in Parashat Chukat. According to Maimonides, Moshe was punished on account of the anger he displayed in responding to *Benei Yisrael's* complaints. His sin lay in not in smiting the rock, Maimonides contends, but rather in his shouting to the people, "*Shim'u na ha-morim*" ("Listen, if you will, O disobedient ones" – 20:10).

In his brief discussion of Moshe's wrongdoing in this incident, Maimonides speaks not only of the intrinsic sinfulness of anger, but also of the unique aspects that made Moshe's response particularly grievous. For one thing, he noted, the people of course looked to Moshe as a model of exemplary behavior, and his furious reaction to their request for water would be seen as an implicit license for angry responses to difficult situations. Moreover, Maimonides notes, Moshe's angry reaction would naturally be viewed as an indication that God was Himself angry at the people. As God's prophet and messenger to the people, Moshe's displeasure would, in the nation's eyes, serve as an accurate reflection of how God looked upon their conduct. As Maimonides notes, the Torah gives no indication of any displeasure on God's part toward the people. In the wake of their demands for water, God simply instructed Moshe to speak to the rock and thereby provide water. He expressed no criticism whatsoever of their demands. Hence, Moshe's angry response misled the people into believing that God disapproved of their conduct in this incident.

Interestingly enough, elsewhere in Maimonides' writings we find a clear indication that the people did, in fact, act improperly at *Mei Meriva*. In the fifth chapter of his *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* (*halakha* 1), Maimonides cites a number of Talmudic passages equating the reverence required towards one rabbi with that which must shown to the Almighty Himself. Based on a comment in *Masekhet Sanhedrin* (110a), Maimonides writes, "Whoever quarrels with his rabbi is considered like quarreling with the *Shekhina*, as it says, '[These are the waters of *Meriva*] where the Israelites quarreled with the Lord...' (Bamidbar 20:13)." Maimonides explicitly invokes *Benei Yisrael's* conduct at the episode of *Mei Meriva* as an example of "quarreling" with one's rabbi, which the Torah condemns with the same severity as it would "quarreling" with the Almighty Himself. Clearly, then, *Benei Yisrael* indeed bore some guilt at *Mei Meriva*. Their demand for water was either itself unwarranted, or the manner in which they expressed this demand – "If only we had perished when our brethren perished before the Lord! And why have you brought the congregation of the Lord to this wilderness... And why have brought us from Egypt...." – was deemed inappropriate.

Nevertheless, as Maimonides writes in *Shemoneh Perakim*, God did not react angrily to the people's complaints. It appears that although they acted inappropriately, God looked upon their conduct forgivingly, perhaps understanding what it meant for a people who had grown accustomed to a miraculous water supply for nearly four decades

to suddenly lose their water source. Moshe, evidently, failed to show this same understanding and sensitivity, and for this he was severely punished.

The story of *Mei Meriva* thus instructs that wrongful behavior does not necessarily warrant an angry response. The contrast that Maimonides emphasizes between God's and Moshe's reactions to the people reminds us of the need to tolerate the mistakes and foibles of others, to show patience and sensitivity to whatever possible factors may have prompted their misconduct. More often than not, this patient approach is far more effective and beneficial to all parties involved than an angry response. Rather than reacting impulsively with furious condemnation, we are better advised to judge our peers favorably whenever possible, and, when necessary, offer criticism in a gentle, respectful and sensitive manner.