

JUNE 27, 2011

Parashat Chukat

The Power of Words

And speak to the rock (Numbers 20:8)

ודברתם אל הסלע (במדבר כ:ח)

In the seminal episode of our *parashah*, God commands Moses to speak to a rock in order to provide water for the people and their flocks. Moses' insistence on hitting the rock instead prompts God to forbid him from entering into the Promised Land. Commentators have offered a variety of interpretations to explain Moses' sin and why his seemingly simple action elicited such a harsh response. Rabbi Shlomo Aviner (See Tal Hermon, p. 282) notes that, "the power of speech expresses the essence of man. The leadership of a nation depends on the power of words, and not the power of violent coercion." It is for exactly this point that we see Moses' punishment was derived from the fact that he, though inadvertently, emphasized physical force over leadership through speech.

Our *parashah* reminds us that a leader must motivate his or her people not through the destructive force of violence, but through the "power of [his] words." Moses' harsh punishment for his insistence on hitting the rock shows us that those who rule by force are ultimately doomed to fail. Sadly, Syrian President Bashar Assad has yet to heed this lesson as he continues to respond to peaceful protests with violence.

As the protests in Syria continue despite brutal government crackdowns, Assad recently delivered an hour-long speech accusing unnamed conspirators and saboteurs for the unrest that has gripped his country for three months, [The Jerusalem Post](#) reported. "I don't think Syria has gone through a period in its history without a conspiracy that was linked to other interests," Assad said. "Conspiracies are like viruses, they increase and multiply and must be eradicated but we can't become immune to them." In an attempt to quell the uprising, he offered vague reforms of the media and election laws, as part of a proposed "national dialogue." Assad's words appear to have satisfied no one. E.U. foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton called the speech "disappointing," Turkish President Abdullah Gül said it was "not enough" and the Syrian people returned to the streets to protest and call for Assad's removal.

God punished Moses for his single mistake in order to powerfully reinforce the notion that leaders must lead not through violence, but with their words and their voices. As the world watches the president of Syria use tanks, mortars and bullets to impose his will upon his people, God's message to Moses in the desert resonates as strongly as ever. ■

Shortness of the Soul

And the soul of the people became short (Numbers 21:4)

ותקצר נפש העם (במדבר כא:ד)

When the 40 years of wandering in the desert had finally concluded, the Jewish nation yearned to enter into the Land as quickly as possible. So, when Moses took them on a circuitous route around the Land of Edom, we read that their "souls became short." What is the meaning of this unique phrase? Rashi explains that the Israelites could no longer stand to be outside the Land. "Regarding any matter that is difficult upon a person we find this language of 'shortness of the soul,' like a person who endures a hardship and his spirit is not wide enough to accept the matter, and there is no more room in his heart for that pain."

Rashi's moving description of the Jewish nation's inability to accept further delays perfectly characterizes a sentiment that is shared by Israelis and Jews around the world regarding the continued captivity of Gilad Shalit. When it comes to the captured Israeli soldier, we are all feeling a shortness of the soul.

Recently, the world marked the five-year anniversary of the kidnapping of Israel Defense Forces soldier Gilad Shalit. In an unprovoked raid on an IDF unit, which killed two soldiers, Hamas terrorists captured Shalit. Since the kidnapping, Hamas terrorists have demanded the release of 1,000 Palestinians currently held in Israeli jails, including some with "blood on their hands," in exchange for the release of Gilad Shalit. To date, Shalit has not even been permitted visits by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). According to [The New York Times](#), "The most recent evidence that he was still alive came in October 2009 when Sergeant Shalit's captors released a videotape of him talking and holding a Palestinian newspaper published on Sept. 14 of that year." Recently, the ICRC called for proof that Gilad Shalit is alive, citing frustration at Hamas' utter disregard for international humanitarian law. ICRC Director-General Yves Daccord said, "The total absence of information concerning Mr. Shalit is completely unacceptable." Although he never sought recognition or publicity, Gilad Shalit, who was kidnapped not for who he is, but for what he is—an Israeli and a Jew—is now a household name, he is the son of a nation that wants him back.

Like the Jewish people in the desert whose souls "became short" with the desire to enter Israel, our souls and the souls of people around the world have also become "short" waiting for Hamas to release Gilad Shalit. As Gilad's parents remain in a tent outside the Israeli prime minister's residence in Jerusalem, year after year as birthdays come and go, holidays pass and the time drags on, we share in their pain. We, as human beings and as Jews, yearn for the day when Gilad is released to his family, a people, and a nation who are all ready to welcome him home. ■

Like Leader, Like Followers

And Israel sent messengers (Numbers 21:21)

וישלח ישראל מלאכים (במדבר כא:כא)

When the Jewish nation wished to travel peacefully through the land of Sichon, Moses sent emissaries there, armed with only a message of peace. Rashi notes a difference between the telling of the story in our *parashah* and a later description of the same event in Deuteronomy. While in our story we read that "Israel sent messengers to Sichon" (21:21), Moses later states that, "I sent messengers" (Deuteronomy 2:26). What is the reason for the shift in who claimed responsibility? Did Moses send the messengers or did the people? Rashi (on 21:21) answers that while Moses himself sent the emissaries, the language conveys a critical lesson about leadership. "The two verses need each other: this first opens [the matter] and the second [verse] closes [the matter]. [This is] because Moses is Israel, and Israel is Moses, in order to tell you that the leader of a generation is the like the generation itself."

Rashi's reminder that leaders reflect the identity of their people carries critical importance as the Palestinian people contemplate a unity government between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas, the terrorist regime ruling Gaza.

PA President Mahmoud Abbas' decision to formally ink a reconciliation agreement with the U.S.-designated terrorist group Hamas is likely to severely undermine U.S. peace efforts. Under the agreement Hamas is not required to accept the Quartet (the United States, European Union, United Nations and Russia) conditions of recognizing Israel's right to exist, rejecting violence and endorsing previous Israeli-Palestinian peace agreements in order to participate in the transitional government and elections. In fact, Abbas made clear that he will not press Hamas to recognize Israel. "We will form a government of technocrats and we will not ask Hamas to recognize Israel," he told Al-Ahram newspaper. Hamas vowed during the signing ceremony that it will continue to use violence. "The only campaign we have is against Israel," Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal said, adding, "Our common enemy is Israel. Israel must be fought through force and diplomacy." By reconciling with Hamas, the PA has chosen to break from its peace commitments with Israel, under which it is required to fight terror and dismantle the terrorist infrastructure represented by Hamas, among other groups.

Should this unity government become a reality, Rashi's lesson is clear: A people and its leadership are reflections of one another. If as the PA accepts terrorists among its leadership, Israel will have no true partner for peace. ■

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