

JULY 11, 2016

Parashat Chukat

Producing Water Through Speech

And you shall speak to the rock (Numbers 20:8)

ודברתם אל הסלע (במדבר כ:ח)

We're all familiar with Israel's incredible achievements in water technology, and Israeli desalination plants around the world are playing a major role in resolving predicted water shortages. Why then are we reading about [water shortages to both Jews and Arabs living in the West Bank](#)? While the causes of water shortages are complex and caused by a multitude of factors, a major factor contributing to the shortages isn't water supply, but the water infrastructure. Quite simply, the infrastructure built in 1967 after the Six-Day War has outlived its usefulness and needs major upgrades and additions. Yet, Israel cannot modernize the infrastructure on its own. In 1995, Israel and the Palestinian Authority established a Joint Water Committee to jointly manage water sources and sewage systems. According to a [Knesset report](#) on Israeli-Palestinian cooperation on water issues, "The Joint Water Committee has an equal number of representatives from each side, all decisions must be unanimous, and there are joint supervisory and enforcement teams subject to the Committee." In order to upgrade the water infrastructure and extraction capacity in the West Bank, the two sides must meet and come to an agreement on how to implement complicated and expensive upgrades. The only way to get the water flowing properly again is for both sides to talk.

Moses would have been able to sympathize with this predicament. Following the death of his sister Miriam, we read that, "There was no water for the congregation..." (Numbers 20:4) which understandably caused the people to complain to Moses and demand that he resolve the crisis before they and their cattle die of thirst. Moses is commanded to take his staff, assemble the nation and, "Speak to the rock before their eyes, that it give forth its water; and you shall bring forth to them water out of the rock..." (20:8) Commentators immediately contrast this water shortage with a previous, similar event found in the book of Exodus where Moses was commanded to "smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink." (Exodus 17:6) As we know, Moses errs and strikes the rock rather than speaking with it, for which he is severely punished, as he loses the right to enter the Promised Land. Why is Moses instructed this time to speak to the rock, especially in light of the previous commandment to strike a rock to produce water? Rabbi Eliyahu Blumenzweig [explains](#) that as the nation has progressed and matured over the years, the act of "striking" was no longer an effective or relevant form of communication. He notes that while 'striking' symbolically represents extracting something by force, speech represents a far more penetrating and effective tool. "Speech is a more mature manner of leadership—a higher and far more internal than the [communication] of 'striking.' Moses...is expected to forge a new path; no longer is 'striking' the proper path. It is incumbent upon him to speak to the nation. Even more significantly, the nation is on a level where 'striking' will not be effective—it is no longer possible to use this form of communication." In striking the rock, Moses failed to recognize that accommodation and agreement can only work through communication, and not by force.

According to the [Jerusalem Post](#), "Israel's water company, Mekorot, [said] that it has increased the water supply to the Palestinians and has not decreased it...With regard to the larger issue of inadequate infrastructure, it said that plans to upgrade the system have been blocked because the Palestinians have refused to allow Israel to convene the Joint Water Committee." Israel's Water Authority has recognized the looming water shortage in the West Bank, and would like to work together with the Palestinians to improve and modernize the entire water system. It cannot do so, because they have not participated in a Joint Water Committee meeting for over five years. "There is a joint water committee that is supposed to meet every few months, to discuss water issues and to solve problems. But currently the

committee is not meeting,” Nadav Tal, a hydrologist at EcoPeace, a not-for-profit organization that is dedicated to promoting solutions for regional water issues, told the [Alegemeiner Journal](#). “We urge the committee to meet as soon as possible.” As Moses learned in the desert, the only effective way to bring water to the people of the West Bank is through direct communication. Instead of using water rights as a political football, the Palestinians must resume direct communication with Israel to reach a mutually agreeable plan to bring water to Jews and Palestinians across the West Bank. ■

Shared Responsibility

Moses and Aaron (Numbers 20:12)

משה ואהרן (במדבר כ:יב)

While we may struggle to understand the severity of Moses’ punishment following his striking of the rock, we can at least recognize that he erred. On the other hand, Aaron, who receives the same punishment as his brother, seems innocent of any wrongdoing. Why was Aaron punished for the actions when only Moses struck the rock? One answer to this question lies in the closeness of the brothers and the mutual responsibility they shared for one-another. From the very beginning, Moses and Aaron acted as partners in their goal of redeeming the Jewish people from captivity. When Moses, standing at the burning bush, complains that he is “of uncircumcised lips,” (Exodus 6:30) God tells him that, “Aaron your brother shall be your prophet.” (Exodus 7:1) Rashi (on Exodus 6:26) comments that while Moses’ name usually appears before Aaron’s in the biblical text, sometimes Aaron’s name appears first, “To tell you that they are of equal importance.” Aaron might not appear as often in the text, but he was nevertheless a full partner in Moses’ accomplishments. For this reason, he also took responsibility for his brother’s errors. According to the Midrash (Midrash Yelamdeinu), after Moses struck the rock, “Aaron could have said, ‘I did not sin,’ but he exhibited self-control and did not attempt to exonerate himself.” Aaron recognized that partnership carries responsibilities and that he too must bear the burden for Moses’ mistakes as if they were his own.

Like Aaron and Moses, who worked together sharing their strengths and abilities with a sense of mutual responsibility, the United States and Israel today work closely together, in order to protect both countries from potential threats. Last month, officials from both countries conducted an unprecedented joint missile defense test which combined the capabilities of both nations to create a single, unified missile defense system.

Late last month, dozens of Israeli and American personnel, together with units from the U.S. military’s European Command took part in a test aimed at synching Israeli and American air defense systems so they can operate cooperatively in a future war, the [Jerusalem Post reported](#). The test, which physically connected system sites scattered around the United States, Israel, and Europe, allowed the Israeli Arrow, Iron Dome and David’s Sling missile defense systems to link up with American systems, including the Aegis Combat System, Terminal High Altitude Area Defense and Patriots. According to Israel’s Ministry of Defense, “The test demonstrated the United States’ commitment for the protection of Israel as well as the interoperability between the United States and Israeli integrated defense system architecture...The system demonstrated impressive capabilities. This test is another stepping stone in towards a multinational missile defense program.” This critical test, which combined American and Israeli missile defense systems, is the tangible result of Congressional funding for increased missile defense, especially in light of the huge missile arsenal which Hezbollah’s has amassed on Israel’s northern border. Last month, the U.S. House of Representatives significantly bolstered its support of the U.S.-Israel missile defense cooperation in the fiscal 2017 defense appropriations bill, as it appropriated [\\$635.7 million for U.S.-Israel missile defense programs](#), which will help Israel defend its citizens against rocket and missile threats, and contribute to America’s missile defense programs.

Like Moses and Aaron who worked together with mutual responsibility, the United States has tangibly demonstrated the shared responsibility that it takes to keep Israel safe and secure. ■

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