



Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

Malbim: Between a Rock and a Rock

Jeffrey Lautman

About 30 years ago, an excited Arnold Lustiger (author of several *sefarim* about Rav Soloveitchik) approached me in shul in Columbus, Ohio. Arnie was always an energetic guy, but that day was different. He said "Jeff, Jeff, Jeff!" - I knew this was going to be good, because rarely did he go to a 3-namer unless he was truly bubbling over - "You've got to see this Malbim on *Mei Merivah!*"

We learned it together, and Malbim has been my favorite Parshan ever since. His interpretation seems to leap off the page, as he merely uncovers for us what turns out to seem obvious.

Let's set the scene in *Parshat Chukat* (Bamidbar 20): Miriam had just died, and we are told in *pasuk* 2 that "there was no water for the congregation (עדה), and they assembled themselves together (ויקרהלו) against Moses and against Aaron."

Note that the word "עדה" and the root ק.ה.ל are often used interchangeably, as "congregate" or "congregation." However, this is not the Malbim's style. In Malbim's view, every Hebrew word has its own unique interpretation.

Another pair of apparent synonyms shows up when we compare *pasuk* 8 to the last time Hashem gave a similar set of instructions. Here, Moshe is told:

8 'Take the rod, and assemble the congregation (עדה), thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock (סלע) before their eyes, that it give forth its water; and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock (סלע); so thou shalt give the congregation (עדה) and their cattle drink.'

Where have we seen this rod before in relation to water? It was in *Parshat Beshalach* (Shemot 17), when Moshe gathered the elders, struck a rock, and got water. There, however, we read:

6 Behold, I will stand before thee there upon the rock (צור) in Horeb; and thou shalt smite the rock (צור), and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink.' And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.

The rock is different! In *Beshalach*, it is a *tzur*; in *Chukat*, a *selah*.

What is the difference between the two rocks? Malbim explains that a *tzur* is a solid rock, which is non-porous and contains no water, whereas a *selah* is porous, like limestone, and has rainwater stored within it.

Let's focus on the *selah* in *Bamidbar* - a porous rock which contains water or is merely covering a source of water. What was Moshe's occupation? He was a shepherd. What do they know how to do? Find water in the desert!

If Moshe finds water in a formation of *selah* rock, then there is no miracle at all; he merely used his technical prowess as a shepherd to find a store of water in the porous rock. Certainly, not a miracle worth showing to the masses!

Unless, however, he were to do so not by banging on the rock to get at the water, but by speaking to it.

Now reread *pasuk* 8 in *Bamidbar* and map out exactly what was going to happen in front of the people:

SPOILER ALERT! SPOILER ALERT!

I am going to give away the Malbim's answer now!

Step 1- Take the *mateh*.

Step 2- Gather the *Eidah* - as Malbim understands it, an organized, hierarchical gathering that reflects appropriate respect and decorum.

Step 3- **Speak** to the rock in the presence of those eyewitnesses.

Step 4- Water will come out - but it's just for show and to dry out the rock; don't let them drink this water!

Step 5-Then-using the *mateh*, convert the newly dry, rock into water using the force of Hashem!

Step 6- Now let the people drink.

This is where the Malbim, writing in the second half of the 19th century, astounds. The really big miracle here, he explains, is that Moshe was able to use his *mateh* to channel a supernatural force and change molecular matter. Malbim states that for a dry rock (a *tzur*, or a *sela* that was just emptied) to convert to water, it has to enter a null state and then go from the null state to water via an external force. The *mateh* channeled such a force from Hashem.

Moshe, as we know, did not speak to the rock, but hit it twice - and a lot of water came out ("*mayim rabim*," v. 11). Of course it did, because he released both the natural water hidden in porous rock *and* the molecularly transformed water.

Why did he do that? Look closely at the *pesukim*:

9 And Moses took the rod from before the LORD, as He commanded him.

10 And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together (קהל) before the rock (סלע), and he said unto them: 'Hear now, ye rebels; are we to bring you forth water out of this rock (סלע)?'

Moshe took up his *mateh* with full understanding of Hashem's two-part command and intent to fulfill it, as attested by the words "as He commanded him."

But he had been instructed to gather an "*eidah*," and was instead confronted with a "*kahal*," a rabble-rousing mob. That is why he calls them rebellious, and he determined that the conditions had not been met for the miracle(s) to take place as planned. Hashem, however, criticizes that choice to deviate from the plan, explaining that this miracle had nothing to do with honoring the people and their leaders, but was intended to sanctify G-d's Name and to inspire faith in Him. Moshe missed the opportunity to achieve that goal

Notice the wording of his punishment: "therefore, you will not bring this *kahal* into Israel" (v. 12). Moshe's error, explains Malbim, was not really severe enough to warrant early death in the *midbar*. Moshe was not allowed to bring them in for other reasons, including that as a *kahal*, they were not ready for a divine conquest through Moshe, but would instead have to travail through history in an attempt to elevate themselves.

Thank you, Arnie Lustiger, for opening my eyes to the Malbim's *peirush*.

Parenting Challenges and Opportunities that Summer Brings

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June has arrived and everyone is thinking about upcoming summer plans. While students are increasingly enthusiastic for a break, some parents express concerns about how to keep a healthy routine at home without the daily school structure. Some apprehension may be warranted, but the summer offers an amazing opportunity to spend time with our children and focus on parenting ideals we might lose sight of during the daily routines of the school year.

Parshas Beha'aloscha begins with Rashi's famous comment about the use of the word *beha'aloscha*, "when you go up," to describe lighting the menorah, instead of the more typical root of *hadlakah*, kindling a flame. Rashi says this wording indicates the *kohen* must hold a fire to the menorah's wick until the flame rises by itself (Bamidbar, 8:2). Many commentaries have used this explanation as a symbol for parenting and *chinuch*. It is our job as parents and educators to continue influencing our children until their flame is able to rise by itself.

Perhaps highlighting some global values can help prepare us for the special parenting opportunities that the summer months will bring.

The first step is to imagine what success with our children might ultimately look like, to create a parenting roadmap to guide us. While there are many appropriate answers to this question, here are some I have adopted from my personal and professional roles:

- We want our children to have a strong relationship with Hashem, always striving to learn more and recognizing that He is the center of all that happens in the world.
- We work hard to develop a healthy sense of self-esteem and confidence, to know how much Hashem cares for us, even when things do not go our way, and to see problems as challenges that help us grow.
- We want to instill an enthusiasm for life, recognizing that each *neshama* has a special mission which can only be accomplished by that one individual.
- We want our children to know their own strengths and weaknesses, and to harness, not deny, each aspect of their unique personalities (Shabbos 156a).

Teaching our children to internalize these ideas would certainly be steps in achieving parenting success. But how do we get there?

One major factor is time. We all know that adolescence is often a particularly challenging stage for parents, as our children become just like adults in some areas while remaining complete children in others. Good parenting is balancing those sides in interacting with our kids, knowing when to give them space and when to be available to talk, guide, and influence. In 1996, *The Rockford Register Star* learned from teens themselves that they longed for more interaction with their parents. Hundreds of teens across America were asked, *What is your number one complaint?* Surprisingly, teens consistently said, "Our parents do not know us." The following year, *Family Circle Magazine* highlighted a similar issue, finding that fathers spent only eight minutes

a day talking to their children, and working mothers, only eleven. Are we any better today, over 20 years later? A recent study published in *USA Today* showed that parents now spend 40% less time with their children than those in the previous generation.

The greatest gift Hashem has given us is time. Each morning, we thank Hashem for another day to fulfill our mission in His world. As parents, time is the most valuable currency for showing love. When I was a young boy, our family used to look forward each summer to a family vacation. One year, my father announced that we might have to cancel our vacation plans due to an issue with a major client. After a few agonizing days, my parents decided to go on the vacation even if it meant losing an important client. My father may have lost a client, but he gained all of our love and respect for showing us how important we were to him. Spending time should never be taken for granted.

A second value to consider is how we define and demonstrate love for our children. To me, the definition of love is "if it is important to you, my child, it automatically becomes important to me." When my children were younger, I knew all the ways to braid hair, names and personalities of each doll in the home, the importance of memorizing sport statistics, and why certain toys had to be in the bathtub before it was safe to enter. The more we show our children that their interests are relevant to us, the more they will feel loved and cared for. Summer is a wonderful time to explore topics of interest in ways we may not have time for during the school year.

One struggle of parenting, which can become especially pronounced during the summer months, is accepting that sometimes our children will not make the choices we would prefer. I once heard a beautiful *midrash* describing that while *neshamos* are waiting in Heaven to be born, they look into the world to choose the parents they want to have. The *neshamos* know which parents will be able to provide the exact supports and tools needed to accomplish their distinctive task. Our job is to embrace each child's unique mission with a full heart, even if it challenges us in the process. We are exactly where we should be.

Finally, in Parshas Va'yishlach, Yaakov prepares for battle with Eisav in three ways: with gifts (*doron*), war strategy (*milchama*), and *tefillah*. Perhaps the same strategies can be used to prepare for the summer months with our children:

- Doron- let us invest in the gifts of time, understanding, love, and relationships with our children.
- Milchama- love does not mean being afraid to set limits with our children. Discipline and rules are not contradictory to love; ultimately, they show how much we care.
- Tefillah- nothing positive can happen without Hashem's help.

May we use the gift of summer to bond even more with our most precious possessions, our children, and may we merit to successfully raise the future leaders of Klal Yisrael - until, like the flames of the *menorah*, they can rise on their own.

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