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Dvar Torah for Parshat Chukkat

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Rising Above Rock Bottom

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum '93 | BronfmanTorah | Chukkat 2016

Rachel is the Rabbi and Executive Director of the Kavana Cooperative, a dynamic Jewish community in Seattle. She is a proud Bronfman alumna from '93, and she's serving on the faculty of BYFI this summer for the fourth time.

Nicolas Poussin - Moses Striking Water from the Rock (1649)

I write to you from Jerusalem, where 26 fellows are about halfway through another wonderful BYFI summer!

This week (the third week of the fellowship summer), our theme has been the broad Israeli political landscape. As you can imagine, this has raised all sorts of challenging questions regarding the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians. The fellows have heard from a diverse array of speakers, from Ali Abu Awwad (a Palestinian who advocates for nonviolent resistance to the Israeli occupation) to Yehuda Glick (a member of Knesset who has advocated for

reestablishing a Jewish presence on the Temple Mount).

In thinking about this complicated set of issues from such different perspectives, I have found this week's parasha to be helpful. Parashat Chukkat contains the famous story of Moses hitting the rock rather than speaking to it, in order to bring forth water. Re-reading the story this week, new details jumped out at me: details that I believe might serve as a guide for Jews trying to understand, unpack, and discuss the many thorny questions surrounding "the *matzav*" (the Israeli-Palestinian conflict).

For easy reference, here's the text of the story, from Numbers 20:1-11:

The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there.

The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron.

The people quarreled with Moses, saying, "If only we had perished when our brothers perished at the instance of the LORD! Why have you brought the LORD's congregation into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die there? Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!"

Moses and Aaron came away from the congregation to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and fell on their faces. The Presence of the LORD appeared to them, and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts."

Moses took the rod from before the LORD, as He had commanded him. Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them, "Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?" And Moses raised

his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank.

But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.”

What lessons are embedded in this story that might offer us guidance during these challenging times?:

1) Context matters. As many times as I’ve read the story of Moses hitting the rock, I’m not sure I’ve ever before really thought about the fact that it takes place in the immediate wake of a huge loss for Moses and Aaron! Maimonides suggests that Moses’s punishment is so harsh because of the anger that he displays towards the Israelites (“Listen, you rebels”). Noting that Moses has just experienced the death of his older sister Miriam – the one who saved his life when he was a baby and has been a partner in leadership for decades now – I wonder if we might judge him a little more generously? After all, anger in the face of such a staggering personal loss seems quite natural and – if not justified, at least understandable. In evaluating any situation, of course, we have to ask how, which, and how much context to allow in. This is certainly true as we try to sort through the conflicting Israeli and Palestinian narratives in all their complexity.

2) Sometimes the rules of engagement change. It turns out that our story in Parashat Chukkat is not the first time that Moses attempts to bring forth water from a rock! In Exodus 17:6, God says to Moses: “I will stand before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock and water will come out of it for you and the people to drink.” Here in Numbers 20, when Moses strikes the rock rather than speaking to it as commanded, perhaps he is simply acting out of habit, returning almost reflexively to the tried and true methods? This prompts me to ask: what happens when our old strategies aren’t working any more, when the rules of engagement need to change? Are we the kind of resilient leaders who are capable of adapting,

or do we fall back on our old scripts?

3) Words over violence. Often, people turn to violent means – hitting rather than speaking – when they feel that their words are not being heard. Reading the story again this week, I was struck by the fact that God commands Moses and Aaron not only to speak, but to speak to a rock. A rock is not a conversation partner or a “partner for peace.” And yet, if Moses can be asked to wield words rather than weapons in the face of a rock, I expect that we can hold each other and members of our broader communities/society accountable to do the same.

Here in the Fellowship summer, the 2016 Bronfmanim continue the long BYFI tradition of building a pluralistic Jewish community together. As they prepare to spend their third Shabbat together in Tzfat and then to move into the Mifgash with the Israeli Amitim, I hope that the Fellows will be able to utilize the tools that we’ve been practicing over recent weeks and assimilate the lessons of Parshat Chukkat: listening to one another with compassion, understanding, and nuance; remaining open and adapting strategies when the rules of engagement change; connecting with one another and probing with words and respect.

Over nearly 30 years, this BYFI community (in all of our glorious diversity!) has served as precisely that kind of a place, where many of us have learned to hone the skills needed to engage in challenging conversations and to resolve conflicts. I hope that all of us will have the courage to apply these skills broadly in the world – whether in Israel, America, or anywhere else. This week, the whole world feels quite in need of healing!

With prayers for the coming weeks to be filled with the de-escalation of violence, a move towards justice and equality, and “copious water” for all,

Rachel

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Continue the conversation. Send Rachel your thoughts: rabbi@kavana.org



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