



The Faithful Shepherds

What is true love? And what's this business with Moses and the Rock?

Holy Land Burial

Many Jews have bought burial plots for themselves in Israel and they've instructed their families to transport their bodies, after 120 years, to Israel and bury them there. Where did this custom begin? Who was the first Jew to do this?

It was Jacob on his deathbed who asked his son Joseph to do him the favor of burying his body in Israel. Throughout the generations, countless of Jews have followed his example, and chosen to have their resting place be in the Holy Land.

[The Talmud explains Jacob's reason: When the time of the resurrection arrives, those buried outside of Israel will have to roll through the Earth's tunnels to Israel where they will be resurrected and rejoin the rest of our nation. Jacob did not want that to happen to him.]

In light of the above the Rebbe once asked, "Why have all of the Chabad Rebbes allowed themselves to be buried outside of Israel? They could have asked their Chassidim to bury them in Israel!"

Why Hit the Rock?

Let's look into this week's parsha for some insight. Moses and Aaron are told that they will not enter the Promised Land for they hit the rock

instead of obeying G-d and talking to it.

Every time I teach this story I am asked, why was Moses given such a harsh punishment for hitting a rock? And what about Aaron, why is he punished when he didn't do anything? And Miriam, who died before the story with the rock, why did she not merit to enter the Promised Land?

But before we deal with this question I have a better question. Why did Moses, the servant of G-d, humblest of all men, disobey G-d's instructions in the first place? The Midrash explains that Moses was angered by the Jewish people's complaining. In his anger he made a mistake.

However, anyone who understands who Moses was, will agree that there must be more to this story than what meets the eye. Why did this righteous man decide to hit the rock instead of speaking to it as G-d had commanded?

Let's look at a similar story. In the Yom Kippur haftora we read about Jonah. G-d had given him a prophecy to deliver to the people of Nineveh but he did not want to deliver it. Instead he hopped on a boat and "ran away from G-d". The obvious question is: why did he not want to deliver G-d's message?

Rashi explains that Jonah thought to himself, "The Nineveh people — who are not Jewish — will repent when I deliver G-d's message. When that happens, the Jewish people will look terrible in the eyes of G-d. G-d might even punish them, for they are not responding to His repeated warnings."

In this act Jonah demonstrated his immense love for his people. He endangered his own life and his relationship with G-d to protect the Jewish people.

But let's think about this. Jonah knew that if he disobeyed, there would be dire consequences. He also knew that even if he wouldn't carry out his mission G-d would find someone else to arouse the people to repent (and make the Jewish people look bad). Why then did he not fulfill his mission? Why incur G-d's wrath for no reason?

Yet, knowing all of this, his burning love for his people simply did not let him have a hand in what could become a disaster for the Jews. His love for them was so great that he sacrificed his life for them.

The Greatest Merit

The same applies to Moses. G-d wanted the people to learn from the rock. "If a rock follows G-d's commands surely we should too." But Moses was afraid that the people would not learn the lesson. In that case, instead of being beneficial for the people, it would become detrimental. People would say, "A rock follows G-d's command and the Jewish people don't?!"

Although the Jewish people constantly badgered him in spite of everything he had done for them and harassed him at every turn, still he loved them very much. He decided instead to hit the rock and to take any subsequent consequence upon himself. He sacrificed his life and relationship with G-d to protect the Jewish people.

As it turns out, this act of bravery stands as one of the strongest merits for us Jews. On Sukkot when we begin to pray for rain, we mention every merit we have in connection with water, to arouse divine favor that we may be granted ample water in the coming year. We start with Abraham and work our way through the generations. When we get to Moses we say, "Remember the one in a reed basket that was drawn from the water... He struck the rock and there streamed forth water. For the sake of his righteousness, favor us with an abundance of water." These are also the words to a famous upbeat Chabad song.

If this act were less than desirable, we surely would not mention it in a plea for divine favor. In the days of the Temple, when the High priest would enter the Holy of Holies he would remove every garment containing gold. He did this so G-d should not be reminded of the sin we committed with gold – the golden calf. Similarly, if hitting the rock is still considered a sin, we wouldn't want to bring it up and put G-d in a bad mood.

It is clear then, that this has become one of the greatest merits for us and for Moses. He sacrificed his life and struck the rock to protect us, his people.

Now our original question is even stronger. If G-d was pleased with Moses' demonstration of self-sacrifice on behalf of His people, why did He punish Moses for it?

Why They Remained

The Rebbe explains: Moses could have accomplished anything with the power of his prayers. He could have gotten himself into the land if he wanted to. But he worried: what would happen to the generation buried in the desert. There he was, about to enter the Promised Land while the six hundred thousand people he brought out of Egypt were all gone, buried along the way. Moses (as well as Aaron & Miriam) did not want to desert their people, so they stayed in the desert. [One day they will lead this generation into the land G-d promised they would see, although this won't happen until the final redemption.]

This is also the reason for our Rebbes remaining, at least physically, outside of Israel. They remained so they could be with the people of their generation, their flock, to help, pray and protect them through the long, arduous last years of exile. And soon they will lead their flock into the Promised Land, upon the arrival of our Righteous Moshiach.