**Parenting from the Parsha- Parshat Chukat- The Perils of Anger**

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Perhaps one of the most perplexing stories in the Torah is that of Moshe hitting the rock. Shortly after the death of Miriam, the Torah relates that Am Yisrael once again complains over a lack of water. Hashem commands Moshe and Aharon to take the staff, gather the nation, and to speak to a rock that would then pour forth water. Moshe takes the staff, gathers the nation, admonishes them for their actions, and strikes the rock twice, after which water pours out for the nation and their animals. Immediately afterwards, G-d tells Moshe and Aharon that since they “did not believe in Me and sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel”, they will not be privileged to lead the nation into Eretz Yisrael.

The meforshim struggle to understand the exact nature and severity of Moshe’s sin. While Moshe clearly disobeyed Hashem by hitting the rock instead of speaking to it, why was this was such a problematic mistake- to the extent that G-d refers to it as a lack of belief in Him, and results in Moshe and Aharon not being able to lead Am Yisrael into Eretz Yisrael?

The Rambam, in his sefer Shemona Perakim, suggests a novel interpretation to this entire episode. He explains that Moshe’s hitting of the rock was not the root sin, but rather a symptom of a greater transgression on Moshe’s part- namely his losing his temper and getting angry. Quoting the opening reprimand that Moshe gives the people before hitting the rock, “Listen here, you rebels”, the Rambam notes that Moshe failed to maintain the proper emotional equilibrium required of him, moving instead to the extreme of anger over patience. In doing so he profaned G-d’s name by acting in a way that was unbecoming of the Jewish leader, the ultimate role model for the people. Adding to Moshe’s transgression, the Rambam posits that the sin was exacerbated because Am Yisrael saw Moshe as their representative of Hashem. They therefore interpreted Moshe’s anger as symbolic of G-d’s anger towards them- which in this instance was incorrect, as nowhere in the text is there an indication that Hashem was angry at Am Yisrael for their complaints. By setting a bad personal example and misrepresenting G-d’s feelings to the nation, Moshe truly caused the profaning of G-d’s name, and therefore was punished by not being able to lead the people in Eretz Yisrael.

In his Mishna Torah Hilchos Deos 2:3, the Rambam goes even further in his discussion regarding the perils of anger. After outlining his famous rule of following the middle path, known as the “golden mean”, regarding all characteristic traits, the Rambam then adds that there are two character traits that are exceptions to the rule- traits which a person should try to rid himself of completely- the traits of haughtiness and anger. A person should strive to never get angry even over those things for which anger would be justified. Even in situations where anger appears necessary for purposes of chinuch or communal leadership, one should appear angry in order to accomplish the desired goal, but should not feel anger in his heart even in such circumstances. Anger is such a damaging and dangerous trait, that one should strive to purge himself of it entirely.

Although the Rambam doesn’t explicitly do so, perhaps we can things a step further, and use the Rambam’s explanation to explain a couple of other details of this story. Perhaps we can suggest that Moshe’s hitting of the rock was really a direct result of his anger. One of the byproducts of a person losing his temper is that he loses control of himself, resulting in him saying or doing things that he did not really intend. Perhaps due to Moshe’s frustration, he lost control of his actions, resulting in him hitting the rock as opposed to speaking to it, as G-d had commended. Based on this understanding, perhaps we can also suggest that G-d’s reaction to Moshe’s action was once again more a reality than it was a punishment per say. With Moshe losing his temper and allowing his anger to overcome him in such a public fashion, G-d concluded that he was no longer fit to be the proper leader to bring the nation into Eretz Yisrael. The leader that would lead them into the promised land needed to be a leader who could better contain his emotions, particularly in the public arena- and which Moshe appeared unable to do.

Dealing with our own anger/frustration as we raise our children is a particularly challenging topic. Parenthood grants us a certain level of authority- and when we feel that this authority is challenged or we feel disrespected, the natural reaction is to get angry. We become frustrated that our children don’t listen to us- and often react by yelling or punishing them for their actions. We then justify our actions by rationalizing that we are simply being mechanech our kids, and therefore the anger is justified.

However, Rav Wolbe, in his sefer Zria U’binyan B’Chinuch, argues that this a classic example where chinuch is used to cover up parents’ own self deficiencies. In most cases where a parent loses his temper at his kids, the real motivation behind the anger is feeling disrespected or frustrated, its about the parent own ego. Even worse, argues Rav Wolbe, in these situations we tend to lose sight of the actual child in front of us- viewing him instead as the object through which we regain our sense of pride and respect by punishing them or lashing out at them. Actual chinuch our kids is often the last thing on our minds.

Taking things a step further, getting angry at our children can have unpredictable consequences. As we mentioned above, when a person gets angry they tend to lose control of themselves, and often say and do things they later regret. Particularly regarding our children, it is crucial that we are careful about the things we say or do to them- as we can never realize the long-term ramifications of our comments or actions.

And specifically when it comes to educating our kids about Judaism and mitzvot, we must be very careful about how we react to them. Similar to how Moshe represented Hashem to the nation, on some level we represent G-d to our children. If we react to how they act religiously with anger and irritation, they may mistakenly infer that Hashem is angry at them as well, which may cause a lasting impact on their own person relationship with Hashem.

Of course, as the Rambam himself points out, there may be times where display of anger is justified, or even warranted, for the sake of educating our kids. One example that comes to mind is if a young child runs into the street by himself, and it is crucial that the parent helps him understand the severity of his actions for his own safety. Even in those cases, however, it is important that the anger is only displayed on the outside, for the sake of the child. Inside, however, there should not be real anger towards the child- rather love and compassion.

To be sure- controlling our anger, particularly in the realm of parenting, is extremely challenging. The natural reaction when our children disobey or disregard us is to get upset at them, and act accordingly. Particularly as our children get older and begin to assert their independence, it may cause us to feel a lack of control, and the resulting frustration. However, the first step towards improving in this area is to recognize the true source of our anger- often it is our own ego and personal pride. And while we may justify our actions in the name of chinuch, often times our anger has the opposite effect, and hurts our ability to properly educate our kids.

Thousands of years ago, our greatest leader made the mistake of allowing his anger to get the better of him- causing G-d to decide that he was not the appropriate person to lead the nation into Eretz Yisrael. Many years later, we must be mindful of the occupational hazards of anger and all that comes with it- particularly as we yearn to educate our kids in the most impactful way possible.

Shabbat Shalom!