

Chukkat June 30, 2012 / 10 Tammuz 5772

Rabbi Aaron Krupnick

A reporter goes to Israel on assignment. She is looking for something emotional and positive, a human interest story; something like that guy in Sarajevo who risked his life to play the cello everyday in the town square. No matter what, he played every day. In Jerusalem, she heard about an old Jew who had been going to the Western Wall to pray, no matter what, twice a day, every day, for a long, long time. So she went to check it out. She goes to the Western Wall and there he is! So she watches him pray and after about 45 minutes, when he turns to leave, she approaches him for an interview. "Rebecca Smith, CNN News. Sir, how long have you been coming to the Wall and praying?" "For about 50 years." "What do you pray for?" He says, "For peace between the Jews and the Arabs; for all the hatred to stop; for our children to grow up in safety and friendship." Impressed she asks, "So how do you feel after doing this for 50 years?" "Like I'm talking to a wall!"

Parashat Chukat contains the famous and mysterious story of Mei Meriva, where Moshe is instructed by Gd to speak to a stone in the wilderness to produce water, but, as you know, Moshe strikes the rock, instead. Gd severely punishes Moshe and Aharon for their failure in this regard and decrees that they will die in the wilderness rather than go with Benei Yisrael to the Land of Israel.

Among the many questions raised concerning this incident is why God had instructed Moshe to speak to a rock. Why would He ordain such a peculiar display? Let Gd give the water in a miracle. Let Moshe hold up his staff like he split the Red Sea. But talking to a rock sure looks like he's... talking to a wall!

But Rav Moshe Feinstein suggested that this might actually be the point: that Moses should be used to talking to a stone by now and, in spite of his frustration, he should continue to do so. It is an important educational message that Gd seeks to convey to Moses, and by extension, to us. Sometimes, when we attempt to guide, instruct or teach those under our charge we experience the feeling of "speaking to a rock", that our words come upon deaf ears. Any of you who have had children know what I mean. And especially those of you have taught classes can understand... You know that feeling; like you are talking to a rock. But Gd wanted to demonstrate

that even when we "speak to a rock," when it appears as though our words are having no impact, we can still, eventually "produce water" - the symbol of life and of growth. After all, "speaking to the rock" is a far more preferable approach than "hitting the rock," trying to convey the message through harsh criticism, sarcasm or condemnation, which is exactly what happened to Moses when he got exasperated, thinking he was talking to a wall.

When the people voiced their complaints about the lack of water, crying, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to bring us to this bad place," Moshe felt frustrated. His first impulse, like yours might have been, was to lash out. He responded by calling the people "morim" ("rebellious ones" - 20:10), and the Rambam points to Moshe's outburst of anger and frustration as the essence of his wrongdoing in this episode. (And what is the Hebrew rod for a teacher? Moreh! Moshe is the exasperated teacher.) Moshe felt that after forty years of living a miraculous existence in the wilderness there was nothing more that could be done to correct the people's outlook. He was done talking, done teaching. It was like talking to a rock and he was fed up! As the nation's leader and teacher, he felt hopeless. If, after all this time they still did not recognize God's unlimited power and ability to provide, he thought, then they likely never will. So he lashes out at them, he lashes out at the rock.

But that was not what Gd wanted from Moshe. It's not what Gd wants of us. Gd instructed Moshe to speak to the rock to remind him of his responsibility to speak to Benei Yisrael even if it seemed they would not listen. Rather than fall into despair, Moshe was to continue doing his job of patiently teaching, leading, guiding and educating, with full confidence in the people's ability to understand.

This is one of the most important lessons we can learn, even if we learn it at Moshe's expense and that is that education and growth are a slow and steady process of consistency; consistency that says more about the teachers than it does about the students. And the best teachers are the one who are most consistent in their message, even when it sometimes feels like they are talking to a wall. With time and patience the message of good teachers is usually internalized.

I look back at the students I have taught over the years, particularly the teens, and I see how hard it is to predict who has absorbed what. It is so

hard to tell. There are students who seemed so responsive, but years later seemed to have absorbed little of what I was trying to impart. And then there are students who didn't really seem all that interested who have dedicated their lives to meaningful Jewish expression as young adult. Sometimes it is hard to tell the rocks from the sponges.

I think about the single most important Jewish teacher I had in my childhood, Mr. Blum. He was kind and patient and understanding and yet I believe he would be astounded to see that I have become a Rabbi. Mr. Blum was our Junior Congregation leader at Melrose B'nai Israel. He made Junior Congregation fun, but it was also empowering. By being able to take part I came to realize how much I loved Judaism. His consistent devotion to his students' personal growth brought out the best in him as he tried to do the same for us. But as good as Mr. Blum was, Larry Abrams (father of this shabbat's bar mitzvah) is better. Larry, you are the master teacher. Your consistent encouragement for the children of our congregation, your enthusiasm for Jewish life and learning is contagious. And it is an example for all of us to follow.

So I ask all of us to consider: whose life could you change for the better by encouragement, even when it might seem that they are not listening? How can you be a better instructor in the school of life? How can the process of patient, consistent, loving education of others bring out the best in you? Gd wants us to persevere, even if we sometimes feel that we are talking to a rock. We have Torah inside of us that needs to be shared. It is part of our divine call to bring that Torah to life and to lovingly transmit it to a world in need of healing and growth.