

Parashat Hukat - Water From the Rock

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In the "Water of Contention" story (*Mei Merivah*; Numbers 20:7-1; 27:14) God ordered Moses to take his rod and "talk" to the rock, so that the rock will give forth its water. Moses then "hit" the rock with his rod "twice", and an abundance of water streamed from the rock. What is the meaning of this story?

The imagery of "talking" to the rock, or "hitting" it with a rod, reflects the reality of nomadic life in the desert. Both "talking" to the rock and "hitting" it are adequate metaphors for the ancient nomadic way of searching for and finding water in the desert. The desert sands absorb the scanty rainfalls. However, some large amounts of water may find their way and safe storage into some hollow rocks. In search for water, the nomad (in antiquity and even to-day) would use a rod with which to knock on rocks to "communicate" with them ("talk" to them). The knocking on the rock was done in two stages (twice, *pa'amaim*, double hitting), first, inquisitively, to find out whether it contains water; then, if the echoes are promising (the rock's "answer" is "yes"), the nomad would hit it again more forcefully to break it open (figuratively "telling" the rock to release its water).

Moses well understood God's order - conveyed in vivid imagery of biblical realism - and fully followed it. He communicated with the rock through his rod, by "hitting" it - which is the proper (and only) way of "talking" to it. Moses "talked" to the rock with his rod by "knocking" on it. This is, after all, the only language a rock understands. As far as his picturesque communiqué with the lifeless and static rock, Moses successfully and faithfully followed both the old established nomadic method and the divine order. Moses, however, was censured for his flawed leadership in his communication with the people. Moses related to them harshly and impatiently. Instead of speaking to them softly Moses chastised them roughly. In midrashic metaphor, instead of talking to his people, Moses virtually "hit" them with his harsh rod of authority.