

**Hukat: And Moses Hit the Rock**  
**Rabbi Eliot Malomet July 13, 2024 7 Tammuz 5784**

If you went to Hebrew School between 1950-1980 it is quite likely that you learned this song:

וּמִשֶּׁה הִכָּה עַל צֹר	<i>And Moses hit the rock (tzur)</i>
בְּמִטְשָׁה הִכָּה עַל סֵלַע	<i>He hit the stone (sela) with this staff (sela)!</i>
בְּמִטְשָׁה הִכָּה עַל סֵלַע	<i>He hit the stone with his staff</i>
וַיֵּצֵאוּ מִמֶּנּוּ מַיִם, מַיִם!	<i>And water came out of it (mayim)!</i>
בְּמִטְשָׁה הִכָּה עַל סֵלַע	<i>He hit the stone with the staff</i>
וַיֵּצֵאוּ מִמֶּנּוּ מַיִם, מַיִם!	<i>and water came out of it, (mayim)!</i>
הִפְלֵא וּפְלֵא!	<i>Wonder of wonders!</i>
הִפְלֵא וּפְלֵא, פְּלֵא!	<i>Wonder of wonders, wonders!</i>
הִפְלֵא וּפְלֵא!	<i>Wonder of wonders!</i>
אָמֵן סֵלָה.	<i>Amen Sela.</i>

**HaFlei VaFele (Wonder of Wonders!)** was written by Yaakov Kamson<sup>1</sup> and the melody was composed by Yedidiah Admon.<sup>2</sup> They were part of a Hebrew renaissance, aware that they were creating a new musical



idiom for a new country. **HaFlei VaFele** was published in 1947 and to this day, remains part of the Jewish choral canon.<sup>3</sup> It is just one of innumerable examples of how the Bible shapes Israeli culture. As commentary, it playfully conflates two water stories: the first one occurs in **Parashat Beshalah**, (Exod. 17:1-7); and the second one occurs in our **parasha, Hukat**, (Numbers 20:1-13). The conflation is obvious from the beginning of the song: **וּמִשֶּׁה הִכָּה עַל צֹר** - **and Moses hit the tzur** in the first line, immediately changes to **בְּמִטְשָׁה הִכָּה עַל סֵלַע** - **he hit the selah with his staff**. in the second line. **Tzur-rock** is the word used in **Beshalah** and **sela-rock** is the word used **Hukat**. **Tzur** and **Sela** are often found parallel to each other in biblical poetry:

ה' סֵלֵעִי וּמִצְדָּתִי	<i>O God, my rock-selah, my fortress,</i>
וּמִפְלְטִי	<i>my rescuer,</i>
אֱלֹהֵי צוּרִי	<i>my God, my rock-tzur</i>
אֲחַסֶּה בּוֹ...	<i>in whom I seek refuge... (Psalm 18:3)</i>

There are many similarities and differences between the two stories, but we are only going to focus on the **hitting-the-rock** part.

<b>Beshalah Episode</b> Exodus 17:4-5	<b>Hukat Episode</b> Numbers 20:6-7
<b>Moses cried out to God, saying: What shall I do with this people? A little more and they will stone me! God said to Moses...</b>	<b>Moses and Aaron came away from the presence of the assembly to the entrance to the Tent of Appointment, and flung themselves on their faces. The Glory of God appeared to them, and God spoke to Moshe, saying...</b>

In **Beshalah** only Moses is the object of the Israelites' complaint. In **Hukat** it is Moses and Aaron. In **Beshalah** Moses **cries out to God**. In **Hukat** Moses and Aaron both **fall on their faces**. In **Beshalah** everything takes place in the open. But in **Hukat**, we have a sanctuary. No longer alone, Moses is joined by Aaron, the main custodian of the sanctuary. In **Beshalah** the appeal is a raw expression of exasperation. In **Hukat**, it is a formal, silent religious gesture as both Moses and Aaron fall on their faces. In both stories however, God speaks only to Moses:

<b>Beshalah - Exod. 17:5</b>	<b>Hukat - Num. 20:8a</b>
<b>Proceed before the people; take some of the elders of Israel with you, and your staff with which you struck the Nile, take in your hand, and go!</b>	<b>Take the staff and assemble the community, you and Aaron your brother;</b>

In **Beshalah**, fresh from the Exodus and the Splitting of the Sea, Moses is to take the **some of the elders** by himself to the rock. This places enormous responsibility on those elders. They are the ones who will bear witness to everyone else. In **Hukat**, the miracle is supposed to happen before the **entire community**. This gives them a greater degree of responsibility. It also places greater pressure on Moses to deliver. If he fails, the consequences will be severe. In **Beshalah**, the staff that Moses uses is identified as **the staff with which he struck the Nile**. That staff has a proven record. In **Hukat**, the text does not specify exactly which staff it is. However, just prior to this episode, in last week's parasha, we have a whole story about another staff - the staff of Aaron! - which sprouted and flowered and produced almonds! (Num. 17:23). After it sprouted, Moses was told: **Return the staff of Aaron before the Testimony to be safeguarded as a sign for the rebellious-folk, that their grumblings may be finished from me, so that they do not die!** (17:25) In other words, the staff of Aaron was

<sup>1</sup> Born 1900, Lithuania, immigrated in 1926, died in 1980.

<sup>2</sup> Born 1894, Ukraine, immigrated in 1906, died in 1982, Israel Prize recipient.

<sup>3</sup> For a beautiful current rendition of this song see the Zamir Chorale's version on YouTube.

"planted" in front of the Sanctuary to warn the people against rebellion. Moses takes that staff to hit the rock in *Hukkat*. The *Beshalah* staff is a *miracle-staff*. The *Hukkat* staff is a *warning-staff*.

<i>Beshalah</i> - Exod. 17:6a	<i>Hukkat</i> - Num. 20:8b
<i>Here, I stand before you there on the rock at Horev; you are to strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people shall drink.</i>	<i>you are to speak to the rock before their eyes so that it gives forth its water. Thus you are to bring them out water from the rock, that you may give-drink to the assembly and to their cattle.</i>

In *Beshalah*, God instructs Moses to **strike** the rock. God is *standing* with him out of the view of the people. In *Hukkat*, God is not standing with him, and Moses is to **speak** to the rock, within the view of the people. This of course, is the major difference between the two episodes.

<i>Beshalah</i> - Exod. 17:6b	<i>Hukkat</i> - Num. 20:9
<i>Moses did thus, before the eyes of the elders of Israel.</i>	<i>So Moses took the staff from before the presence of God, as he had commanded him.</i>

In *Beshalah*, Moses does exactly as God instructs him and everything happens in private, before the elders. He simply takes the staff that he has in his hand. In *Hukkat*, Moses, having prostrated himself in front of the sanctuary, has to reach for the staff that was planted in front of it. The *Beshalah* story ends there, while the *Hukkat* story goes on.

<i>Hukkat</i> - Num. 20:10
<i>And Moses and Aaron assembled the assembly facing the rock. He said to them: Now hear, [you] rebels, from this rock must we bring you out water?</i>

Rather than speak to the rock, Moses angrily speaks to the people. He subverts what God asked him to do. Some would go so far as to say that he was being defiant. Most significantly, he makes it seem as if he and Aaron are the ones who will be bringing the water out of the rock, not God. For this infraction, he will not be allowed to enter the promised land.

<i>Hukkat</i> - Num. 20:11
<i>And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock with his staff, twice, so that abundant water came out, and the community and their cattle drank.</i>

It's not exactly clear what happened here. Did he lift one hand with his staff and hit the rock, or did he lift one hand as a signal of power, and hit the rock with the staff in his other hand? Maybe this is a quibble, but the scene in the war with Amalek, (coincidentally, right after the *Beshalah* story) is important to recall:

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר יָרִים מֹשֶׁה יָדוֹ וַיַּכּוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל וּכְאֲשֶׁר יָנִיחַ יָדוֹ וַיִּגְבֹּר עַמְלֵק.	<i>and it would be, whenever Moses raised his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he set down his hand, Amalek prevailed. (Exod. 17:11)</i>
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In other words, while Moses was channeling God's power in *Beshalah*, here in *Hukkat* **he is demonstrating his own**

**power!** This moment represents a profound transition in the biblical story. By defiantly performing the miracle himself, specifically against God's instructions, Moses failed to sanctify God. While he still got the water to flow, he was demonstratively utilizing his own power and not channeling God's miraculous power. It was simultaneously innovative and subversive.

This brings us back to the song, **הַפְּלֵא וְהַפְּלֵא-HaFlei VaFele** above. Why would the songwriting team of Kamson and Admon, have conflated the Torah's two rock-hitting stories? Was it intentional on their part? We don't know. However, we can supply our own interpretation of that song. What was it about? It celebrates water! It ignores the Israelites' complaints and sidesteps theology. Like its more



famous cousin, *Ush'avtem Mayyim BeSasson* (whose melody was written by Emanuel Amiran (Pougatchov) (b. 1909 Warsaw, immigrated 1924, d. 1993), is about the joy of finding water in the Yishuv and the early years of the State. In that period, the dominant ethos was to work and settle the land and make the "desert

bloom". **The building of a suitable water infrastructure was essential for the population to grow and thrive.**

Indeed, one of the reasons why the British limited immigration during the Mandate period was the fear that the limited water resources would not be able to sustain a rapid population growth. Of course, that was a canard for the real reason: to prevent Jews from living there. Discovering and tapping underground aquifers, building pipelines and the National Water Carrier, were huge projects in the 40's and 50's. While in *Beshalah*, Moses makes a miracle happen *with* God's help, in *Hukkat*, Moses makes the miracle happen *without* God's help. Moses literally takes matters into his own hands and makes the water appear by himself. **Hukkat subverts Beshalah and becomes a model for the early Zionist pioneers.** Rather than see this story as a terrible catastrophe, it is a necessary development in the transition of the people from total dependence on God to taking greater responsibility for their own destiny, an idea that resonates thousands of years later in Zionism. Israel's pioneers understood that they couldn't rely on miracles to sustain them in their *Old-New* land, and they had to harness ingenuity, technology and labor to produce their own "miracles". 80 years after the original water infrastructure projects, Israel is a global leader in water management. While no one has written songs about desalination plants and atmospheric water generation technology, there is still a sense of subversive innovation. **HaFlei VaFele - Wonder of Wonders!** Shabbat Shalom!

This Parasha Sheet is Sponsored by Suzy Levin to commemorate the Yahrzeit of her brother, Buzzy Levin, z'l.

**TODAY IS DAY 281 OF THE HOSTAGES' ORDEAL. WE PRAY FOR THEM AND THEIR FAMILIES. MAY GOD SHIELD AND PROTECT THE IDF IN GAZA AND THOSE UNDER ATTACK IN THE NORTH.**