

# BLOCKED GOAL ANGER



**PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT CHUKAT**  
**RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN**

Anger often surfaces when an obstacle blocks our goals. If we want to accomplish an objective and someone or something arises to hinder us from achieving our intentions, we are prone to respond with anger. This can be particularly challenging for parents or educators whose goals are to inculcate certain values, traits, or behaviors within children, but the children may not always be receptive. In those moments that their teaching goals are blocked, whether due to lack of understanding or due to defiance, the parent or educator is susceptible to feelings of frustration and anger.

Moshe was punished for something. We just aren't sure exactly what went wrong. Still stuck in the desert after almost 40 years, *Bnei Yisrael* complain to Moshe about the lack of food and water, preferring life in Egypt over their situation. G-d instructs Moshe to speak to a rock and it will bring forth water. Moshe takes his staff, says to the people, "Listen you rebels, shall we bring forth you water out of this rock?," hits the rock twice, and water gushed out, providing enough for all to drink. G-d then says to Moshe and Aharon that they will not be allowed to lead *Bnei Yisrael* into the land "Because you did not believe in me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel."

Dozens of explanations have been provided to help explain exactly what Moshe and Aharon did wrong. Famously, Rashi focuses on the fact that Moshe was instructed to speak to the rock and instead he hit it. Alternatively, Ramban contends that the problem is highlighted in Moshe's use of the word "we" when saying "shall we bring forth you water." Instead of capitalizing on an opportunity to demonstrate G-d's miracles, Moshe insinuated that it was him and Aharon who had the power to do so.

Rambam, however, takes a different approach, focusing on the phrase “Listen now you rebels.” Embedded in this language, according to Rambam, is anger. Moshe’s sin is that he responded in anger towards *Bnei Yisrael*. The angry response was problematic from a character perspective as he should have responded with more patience. Additionally, there is a theological danger in that *Bnei Yisrael* could mistakenly think that if Moshe is angry, so is G-d, which would have been incorrect.

Elaborating on Rashi’s approach that Moshe’s fault was hitting the rock instead of speaking to it, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein offers a powerful educational insight. Rabbi Feinstein suggests that G-d wanted Moshe to “speak to the rock because he wanted to teach the lesson that one must speak words of Torah and ethics even to those who seem not to comprehend. Repeating and reviewing ultimately results in understanding” (translation by Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb). As an example, a parent “must never despair of educating his children just because they appear not to understand what he is telling them.” Repetition of ideas and consistent communication is essential. “[J]ust like the rock could not understand but eventually fulfilled G-d’s will. Certainly, human beings, although they seem now not to understand at all, will eventually reach understanding.”

While Rabbi Feinstein builds off Rashi and focuses on the importance of persistence in the face of despair, the message can be amplified if we add the Rambam’s anger approach to the mix. As a leader and a teacher, Moshe had educational aspirations for *Bnei Yisrael*. He wanted them to be grateful to G-d for taking them out of Egypt and for providing for them in the desert. Yet, after uprisings, scandals, and incessant complaints they didn’t seem to be getting the message. He became angry because the message wasn’t getting through and he was not achieving his goals.

When we have important values, traits, or behaviors that we want to teach others, and the messages don’t seem to seep through, it may be natural for us to feel frustrated and express anger. Yet, we are called upon to choose patience instead. Our best bet is to use clear and consistent communication and model the way we want others to follow.

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