



## 5 Topics

to talk over with Moses

Try this imaginative prayer exercise. Imagine yourself to be a member of the Israelite community who witnesses the events of this week's Torah portion. Enter into conversation with Moses, the great holy man, prophet and leader. Talk with Moses about five key events:

### 1. Death.

Talk about the death of his sister, Miriam (20:1) and the death of his brother Aaron (20: 22-29), which occur during the final stops before reaching the promised land.

### 2. Rebellion.

Talk about the lack of water and the people's behavior. This isn't the first time there have been complaints about thirst. What's different this time?

### 3. Miracle.

Talk about the miracle of the rock issuing water, about Moses' behavior

during this incident, and about how you and he look back on this event.

### 4. Consequences.

Talk about the fact that none of the three siblings, Moses, Aaron and Miriam, will enter the promised land. How do Moses and the community feel about this?

### 5. Future.

Talk about your own leadership tasks within the Israelite community as you prepare to go forward without Aaron and Miriam, and ultimately without Moses himself.

# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

## Why reflect on Torah?

*"Israel and the Church remain bound up with one another, according to the Covenant, and interdependent on one another, by accepting one another in a profound internal reconciliation drawn from the depths of their respective faiths."*

(Cardinal Kurt Koch, address in Jerusalem, 2012)

Not so long ago a statement like this from a Vatican official would have been inconceivable. How far we have come since Vatican II! The changes 'at the top' with respect to Jewish-Christian relations in our times are dramatic indeed. But they are changes that must reach far beyond the Vatican into the lives of all members of the church.

Think about it: we Christians love the Jewish Jesus, esteem Jewish saints, revere Scriptures composed by Jews and have inherited Jewish prayers and liturgical forms. This ancestry is God-given; it is fitting that a deep appreciation of Judaism permeate our religious consciousness. In this spirit, the *Light of Torah* series offers a way for Christians to ponder the Hebrew Scriptures with the benefit of Jewish insights. Each week we take a portion of the Torah and explore it in conversation with the sages of ancient and living Judaism.



Numbers 19:1—22:1

*Chukat: 'law [that]'*



Light of Torah  
[www.lightoftorah.net](http://www.lightoftorah.net)

Text: Teresa Pirola  
Design: Sarann Ryan  
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## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar  
of Torah readings:

### Numbers 19:1—22:1

In the Israelites' wilderness journey, Moses and his two siblings, Aaron and Miriam, play a critical leadership role. Today's Torah portion records the deaths of Miriam and Aaron. It also records, in a tantalizingly brief and cryptic account, the troubling event which leads to Moses (and Aaron) being excluded from entering the Promised Land. Read this story in Numbers 20:1-13.

## Tasting Torah

Moses: *"Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?"* (20:10)

God: *"Because you did not trust me...you shall not bring this assembly into the land..."* (20:12).

Exactly what was Moses' offence at Meribah, and why did it deserve such a penalty? The sages<sup>1</sup> debated this question over the centuries...

## Touching Torah

Says Rashi, Moses' offence was that he struck the stone instead of speaking to it as God had asked. According to Maimonides, it was Moses' anger that was offensive (*"Listen, you rebels"*). But Nachmanides disagrees with both, saying that the crux of the matter was that Moses failed to show clearly that God caused the miracle, instead giving the people the impression that Moses himself was the wonder-worker. Ibn Ezra offers this opinion: Moses and Aaron reacted to the people's grumblings in an undignified way, acting like 'fugitives' in the face of their complaints instead of sanctifying God's name with confidence and initiative. Joseph Albo develops this line further, accentuating the lack of faith shown by Moses (*"Because you did not trust in me...."* 20:12.) But Arama has no patience with this argument, at pains to portray Moses as completely obedient to God's will. What, then, was Moses' offence? We find ourselves back at the simplest explanation, supported by the midrash: Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it. And you? How would you name Moses' sin?

## Depthing Torah

Ismar Schorsch, a contemporary Jewish commentator,<sup>2</sup> highlights the importance of reading the incident at Meribah in light of the immediately preceding verse:

*'Miriam died there, and was buried there'* (20:1).

As soon as Miriam dies, the water disappears. Recall that Miriam is a figure whom scripture associates with living water. She saves her baby brother in the waters of the Nile; she leads a victory dance at the Red Sea. Exploring themes illuminated by Rashi, Schorsch portrays Moses as a brother grieving the death of his sister, a loss both deeply personal and striking a blow to the community. Overcome by grief and worn down by the people's grumblings, Moses loses his moral compass and deliberately strikes the rock in defiance of God's instruction. Momentarily he shows a lack of compassion for the people's needs and therefore compromises his prophetic calling to intercede for the people (as he has interceded time and again before).

Schorch's explanation of Moses' offence appeals to our compassion for Moses. It also invites reflection on the enormous responsibility and personal cost of leadership, on what is legitimately expected of a holy person, a prophet and a leader of God's people.

## Doing Torah

In conversation with the variety of opinions presented and the text itself, share your own efforts to interpret this troubling story which leads to Moses' exclusion from the promised land.



## Faith and Life

Reflect upon a time when grief or fatigue threatened to cloud your better judgment.

When does leadership become lonely, and loneliness become dangerous? Discuss.

1. The sages named are Torah scholars of the Middle Ages; see Leibowitz, 236f.

2. Chancellor of Jewish Theological Seminary, NY, 1986-2006.

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (NY: Lambda); [www.jtsa.edu](http://www.jtsa.edu) (Chancellor's commentary, The Jewish Theological Seminary); [www.chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org) (Torah and Jewish information); Scripture: *NRSV*.