



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

Why was Moses excluded from the promised land?

In the Israelites' wilderness journey, Moses and his two siblings, Aaron and Miriam, play a critical leadership role. The book of Numbers records, in a tantalizingly brief and cryptic account, the troubling event which leads to Moses (and Aaron) being excluded from entering the Promised Land (see Num. 20:1-13). After the death of Miriam, the water runs out and the people complain bitterly, hankering after their former life in Egypt. In response God commissions Moses to speak to a rock which will miraculously give forth water. Moses does this, but not without an outburst of his own anger and striking the rock twice:

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

The miracle succeeds, but God says to Moses and Aaron:

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 sages¹ debated this question for centuries...

Rashi offers a straightforward explanation: 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 and explain Moses' offence?

Ismar Schorsch, a contemporary Jewish commentator,² 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).

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

Think of a time when a grief or fatigue threatened to cloud your better judgment. When does leadership become lonely, and loneliness become dangerous? •

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

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

Sources: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Woman's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (NY, 1994); www.chabad.org (Torah and Jewish information); www.jtsa.edu (Chancellor's commentary, The Jewish Theological Seminary). Scripture quotations: NRSV.