



MOSES ROCKS ON

Text 1 – Numbers 20:1-5, 7-13

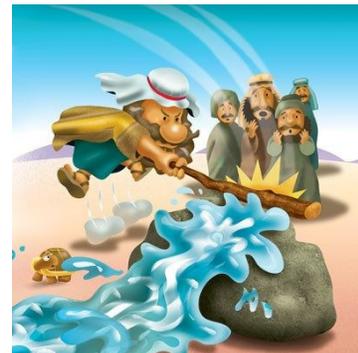
Miriam died and was buried, and the community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron. The people quarrelled with Moses, saying, “If only we had perished when our fellows perished before the Eternal One! Why have you brought God’s congregation into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die there? Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!”

God spoke to Moses, saying, “You and your brother Aaron, take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts.”

Moses took the rod from before the Eternal One, as he had been commanded. Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and Moses said to them, “Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?”

And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank. But the Eternal One said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.”

Those were the Waters of Meribah, meaning that the Israelites quarrelled with the Eternal One, through which God affirmed God’s sanctity.



Text 2 – Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:4

Solomon came and explained, “The day of death is better than the day of one’s birth.” When a person is born they are destined for death; when they die they are destined for life.”

When a person is born all rejoice; when they die all weep. It should not be so. When a person is born there should be no rejoicing, because it is not known whether they will be righteous or wicked. When they die, however, there is cause for rejoicing if they depart with a good name.

It is as if there were two ocean-going ships, one leaving the harbour and the other entering it. As the one sailed out of the harbour all rejoiced, but none displayed



any joy over the one which was entering the harbour. A shrewd man said, “I take the opposite view to you. Do not rejoice over the ship leaving the harbour because nobody knows what will be its plight, what storms it may encounter; but when it enters the harbour all have occasion to rejoice since it has come in safely.”

You find that when the righteous are born nobody feels any difference, but when they die everybody feels it. When Miriam was born nobody felt it, but when she died the well ceased to exist and all felt her loss. The well made her death known. When Aaron, the High Priest, was born nobody felt it, but when he died and the clouds of glory departed all felt his loss. The cloud thus made his death known. When Moses our teacher was born nobody felt it, but when he died all felt it, because the manna made his death known by ceasing to fall.

Text 3 – Numbers Rabbah 19:9

When Moses gathered the Israelites before the rock, they suspected a trick, and began saying, “Moses knows the natural properties of this particular rock! If he wishes to prove his miraculous powers, let him bring out water for us from this other one!”

Moses found himself placed in a dilemma. “If I listen to them,” he thought, “I shall disregard the words of the Omnipresent.”

The Israelites said to him: “Here is a rock; just as you wish to bring out the water from another rock, bring it out of this one!”

He cried to them: “Listen, you rebels – hamorim.” Hamorim bears many interpretations. It may mean ‘rebels’. It may mean ‘fools’. It may signify ‘teachers’ in the sense of the ignorant trying to teach their instructors. It may denote ‘archers’.

Anyway, Moses struck the rock once and small quantities of water began to trickle from it; it was like a man having an issue which comes out in single drops.

They said to him: “O son of Amram! Is this water for sucklings, or babes weaned from milk?”

Moses instantly lost his temper and struck the rock twice, and water came forth abundantly, overwhelming all those who had railed at him. Yet, for all that, Moses wrought his miracle on none other than the rock of which the Holy One had told him. But the Israelites scoffed, “Any rock in that location would gush water.”



Text 4 – Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, 2013

Leadership is a function of time. We do not compare leaders – for there are no timeless standards by which to judge them. Each age produces its leaders, and each leader is a function of an age.

The remarkable fact about Moses and the rock is the way he observes precedent. Almost forty years earlier, in similar circumstances, God had told him to take his staff and strike the rock. Now too, God told him to take his staff. Evidently Moses inferred that he was being told to act this time as he had before, which is what he does. He strikes the rock. What he failed to understand was that time had changed in one essential detail. He was facing a new generation. The people he confronted the first time were those who had spent much of their lives as slaves in Egypt. Those he now faced were born in freedom in the wilderness.

There is one critical difference between slaves and free human beings. Slaves respond to orders. Free people do not. They must be educated, informed, instructed, taught – for if not, they will not learn to take responsibility. Slaves understand that a stick is used for striking. That is how slave-masters compel obedience. Indeed that was Moses' first encounter with his people, when he saw an Egyptian beating an Israelite. But free human beings must not be struck. They respond, not to power but persuasion. They need to be spoken to. What Moses failed to hear – indeed to understand – was that the difference between God's command then and now ("strike the rock" and "speak to the rock") was of the essence. The symbolism in each case was precisely calibrated to the mentalities of two different generations. You strike a slave, but speak to a free person.

Moses' inability to hear this distinction was not a failing, still less was it a sin. It was an inescapable consequence of the fact that he was mortal. A figure capable of leading slaves to freedom is not the same as one able to lead free human beings from a nomadic existence in the wilderness to the conquest and settlement of a land. These are different challenges, and they need different types of leadership.

Great change does not take place overnight. It takes more than one generation – and therefore more than one type of leader. Moses could not become a Joshua, just as Joshua could not be another Moses. The fact that at a moment of crisis Moses reverted to an act that had been appropriate forty years before showed that time had come for the leadership to be handed on to a new generation. It is a sign of his greatness that Moses, too, recognised this fact and took the initiative in asking God to appoint a successor.



Text 5 – Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild, 2016

At the centre of the parasha is a powerful story which deals with the limits of a human being. We hear of an incident which seems on the face of it quite minor, yet which has far reaching impact. God informs Moses that, because of his behaviour, he will not now enter the land he is leading the people towards.

It has been said about Moses that all of his sins – whether the impulsive murder of the Egyptian taskmaster in his youth, the breaking of the stones containing the commandments, or the striking of the rock – show elements of anger and violence, of his unbridled self-will and of his temporarily ignoring the real and present will of God. A modern commentator, Rabbi Norman Hirsch, wrote that “the sin of Moses at Meribah is characteristic of the man, one of a series of sins, and serious. Why serious? Because civilization depends upon humility. Without a sense of limits that flows from the awareness of a moral law and an ethical God, every brutality, every corruption, every atrocity becomes possible.”

When people allow themselves to act without limitations, to let their anger overtake them, and to forget the reality of other people – their needs, their fears, their humanity – then atrocities not only become possible, they become inevitable. Once humility is overridden, and once people forget that God’s will is rooted in moral and ethical imperatives rather than in pride or land or material success – then there are no boundaries, and our own characteristics and needs take over for good or for ill.

Moses fails ultimately in the job he has been set to do. His failure is in his unwillingness to control the righteous indignation he feels on behalf of God. It shows itself in his need to demonstrate to others the rightness of his analysis. His failure doesn’t lie in the feeling of anger as such, but in the way he uses it and allows it to use him.

In this story the demise we are witnessing isn’t to do with physical death, nor with a metaphysical response to the end of life: this time the fatality is Moses’s leadership and his ability to take the people into their next stage of the journey. Because Moses shows that he is unable to change himself, his anger is ultimately stronger than him, and because he doesn’t seem to believe any more that he should rein his emotions in to prevent doing damage around himself, his leadership will come to a premature end.

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