

**YLJC Judaism 101**

**SMASHING THE  
TABLETS: MOSES  
ON TRIAL**

**Study pack**



## THE ONE WITH THE GARLIC

The people took to complaining bitterly before the Eternal One. God heard and was incensed: a divine fire broke out against them, ravaging the outskirts of the camp. The people cried out to Moses. Moses prayed to the Eternal One, and the fire died down.

The riffraff in their midst felt a gluttonous craving; and then the Israelites wept and said, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our gullets are shrivelled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!”

Now the manna was like XXXXXXXXXX, and in colour it was like bdellium. The people would go about and gather it, grind it between millstones or pound it in a mortar, boil it in a pot, and make it into cakes. It tasted like rich cream. When the dew fell on the camp at night, the manna would fall upon it.

Moses was distressed. And Moses said to God, “Why have You dealt ill with Your servant, and why have I not enjoyed Your favour, that You have laid the burden of all this people upon me? Did I conceive all this people, did I bear them, that You should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries an infant,’ to the land that You have promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people, when they whine before me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me. If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!”

And God said: “Tell the people: tomorrow you shall eat meat, for you have kept whining before the Eternal One and saying, ‘If only we had meat to eat! Indeed, we were better off in Egypt!’ The Eternal One will give you meat and you shall eat. You shall eat not one day, not two, not even five days or ten or twenty, but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you. For you have rejected the Eternal One who is among you, by whining before God.”

*Numbers 11:1-2, 4-9, 11-15, 18-20*

## DID THEY REALLY WANT GARLIC?

In this parasha, we see a striking difference between the kvetching of the people, who behave like children, and the torments of their leader, who feels as if he is the parent of an entire family of screaming brats.

According to the text, the troublemakers – ‘hasafsuf’, translated as “riffraff” to recall the Hebrew noun’s onomatopoeic quality – try to incite nostalgia for Egypt by conjuring up images of tasty, varied foods, in contrast to the bland diet of manna. Are the people truly suffering from hunger?

Rashi says that the people are simply exhausted and upset. Their whining is like that of children, and their complaints are really just a call for comfort that, in the wilderness, is hard to come by. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch sees the Israelites as suffering from boredom; God provides all their food and water, Moses makes all the decisions, and thus the people themselves have no real goals or challenges. Their problem isn’t hunger, Hirsch contends, but monotony.

*Karen Winkler Weiss, 2003*

### **THE ONE WITH THE ROCK**

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.

*Numbers 20:1-5, 7-13*

## **THE ONE WITH THE OTHER ROCK**

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.”

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 God had pointed out a single time 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.”

*Numbers Rabbah 19:9*

## **A FEARLESS ADVOCATE**

Moses suggested: “But God, this calf which the Israelites have made can now be a great help to You!”

“How can it be of assistance to Me?” demanded God.

Moses answered: “It can send down rain while You will produce the dew. You can produce the wind and leave the lightning to the calf.”

“Are you also going astray after the calf?” retorted the Holy One, ever to be blessed, “It cannot do these things! There is no substance to it whatsoever!”

To which Moses replied, “If there is no substance to it, then why are You angry with the Israelites?”

*Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:2*

## CREATING CHANGE

The daughters of Zelophehad came forward. The names of the daughters were Machlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the chieftains, and the whole assembly, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and they said, “Our father died in the wilderness. He was not one of the Korach’s faction, which banded together against the Eternal One, but died for his own sin; and he has left no sons. Let not our father’s name be lost to his clan just because he had no son! Give us land among our father’s kin!”

Moses brought their case before the Eternal One. And God said to Moses, “The plea of Zelophehad’s daughters is just: you should give them a hereditary holding among their father’s kin; transfer their father’s share to them. Further, speak to the Israelite people as follows: ‘If a man dies without leaving a son, you shall transfer his property to his daughter.’”

*Numbers 27:1-8*

## TIMES CHANGE AND WE CHANGE WITH THEM

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.

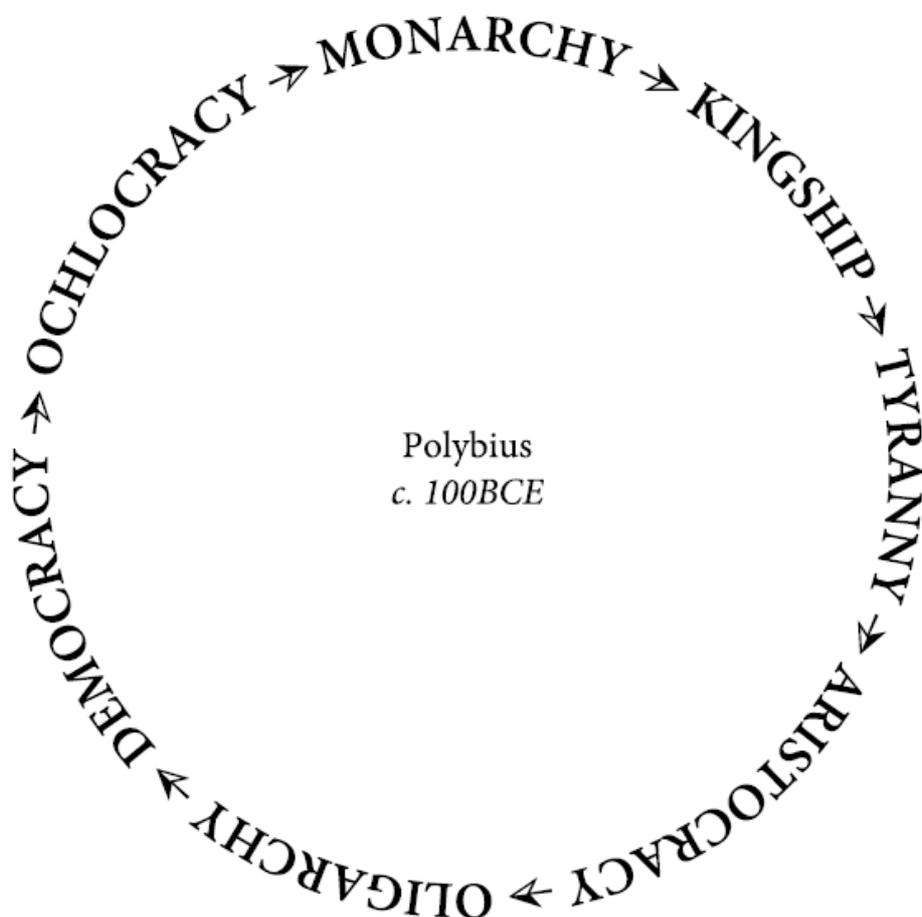
There is one critical difference between slaves and free human beings. Slaves respond to orders. Free people do not. They must be educated, informed, instructed, taught – for if not, they will not learn to take responsibility. Slaves understand that a stick is used for striking. That is how slave-masters 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.

*Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, 2013*



## **DID IT REALLY HAPPEN?**

When in ancient times a pestilence arose in Egypt, the common people ascribed their troubles to the workings of a divine agency; for indeed with many strangers of all sorts dwelling in their midst and practicing different rites of religion and sacrifice, their own traditional observances in honour of the gods had fallen into disuse. Hence, the natives of the land surmised that unless they removed the foreigners, their troubles would never be resolved.

At once, therefore, the aliens were driven from the country and the most outstanding and active of them banded together and, as some say, were cast ashore in Greece and certain other regions; their leaders were notable men, chief among them being Danaus and Cadmus. But the greater number were driven into what is now called Judea, which is not far distant from Egypt and was at that time utterly uninhabited.

The colony was headed by a man named Moses, outstanding both for his wisdom and his courage. On taking possession of the land, he founded, besides other cities, one that is now the most renowned of all, called Jerusalem. In addition he established the temple that they now hold in chief veneration, instituted their forms of worship and ritual, drew up their laws and ordered their political institutions.

*Manetho (3rd century Egyptian priest and historian)*