

לע"נ

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Why Was Moshe Not Destined to Enter the Land?

CHUKAT

It is one of the most perplexing, even disturbing, passages in the Torah. Moshe the faithful shepherd, who has led the Israelites for forty years, is told that he will not live to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land.

No one has cast a longer shadow over the history of the Jewish people than Moshe - the man who confronted Pharaoh, announced the plagues, brought the people out of Egypt, led them through the sea and desert and suffered their serial ingratitude; who brought the Word of God to the people, and prayed for the people to God. The name Israel means "one who wrestles with God and with men and prevails". That, supremely, was Moshe, the man whose passion for justice and hyper-receptivity to the voice of God made him the greatest leader of all time. Yet he was not destined to enter the land to which he had spent his entire time as a leader travelling toward. Why?

The biblical text at this point is both lucidly clear and deeply obscure. The

facts are not in doubt. Almost forty years have passed since the Exodus. Most of the generation who remembered Egypt have died. So too had Miriam, Moshe's sister. The people have arrived at Kadesh in the Tzin desert, and they are now close to their destination. In their new encampment, however, they find themselves without water. They complain. "Why have you brought the Lord's assembly into this wilderness only for us and our livestock to die here? Why did you take us up out of Egypt to bring us to this dreadful place with no grain, no figs, no vines or pomegranates - there is no water to drink!" (Bamidbar 20:4-5). The tone of voice, the petulance, is all too familiar. The Israelites have hardly deviated from it throughout. Yet suddenly we experience not *deja-vu* but tragedy:

Moshe and Aharon went away from the assembly to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. They fell on their faces, and the Lord's glory was revealed to them. And the Lord spoke to Moshe: "Take the staff, you and your brother Aharon, and assemble the community. Speak to the rock before their eyes and it will give forth water. You shall bring forth water for them from the rock, giving the community and their animals to drink." Moshe took the staff from before the Lord, as He had commanded him. And Moshe and Aharon

gathered the assembly together before the rock. He said to them, "Listen now, rebels! Shall we produce water for you from this rock?" Then Moshe raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their animals drank. But the Lord said to Moshe and Aharon, "Because you did not put your trust in Me to demonstrate My holiness in the Israelites' eyes, you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I am giving them." (20:6-12)

Where had Moshe gone wrong? What was his sin? What offence could warrant so great a punishment as not to be privileged to see the conclusion of the mission he had been set by God?

Few passages have generated so much controversy among the commentators. Each offers his own interpretation and challenges the others. So many were the hypotheses that the nineteenth century Italian exegete R. Shmuel David Lutzatto was moved to say, "Moshe committed one sin, yet the commentators have accused him of thirteen or more - each inventing some new iniquity!" One modern scholar (R. Aaron Rother, Shaarei Aharon) lists no less than twenty-five lines of approach, and there are many more.

The following are the most significant: Rashi, offering the simplest and

best-known explanation, says that Moshe's sin lay in striking the rock rather than speaking to it. Had Moshe done as he was commanded, the people would have learned an unforgettable lesson: "If a rock, which neither speaks nor hears nor is in need of sustenance, obeys the word of God, how much more so should we."

Rambam says that Moshe's sin lay in his anger - his intemperate words to the people, "Listen now, rebels." To be sure, in anyone else, this would have been considered a minor offence. However, the greater the person, the more exacting are the standards God sets. Moshe was not only a leader but the supreme role-model of the Israelites. Seeing his behaviour, the people may have concluded that anger is permissible - or even that God was angry with them, which He was not.

Ramban, following a suggestion of Rabbeinu Chananel, says that the sin lay in saying, "Shall we produce water for you from this rock?" - implying that what was at issue was human ability rather than Divine miracle and grace.

R' Yosef Albo and others (including Ibn Ezra) suggest that the sin lay in the fact that Moshe and Aharon fled from the congregation and fell on their faces, rather than standing their ground, confident that God would

answer their prayers.

Abarbanel makes the ingenious suggestion that Moshe and Aharon were not punished for what they did at this point. Rather, their offences lay in the distant past. Aaron sinned by making the Golden Calf. Moshe sinned in sending the spies. Those were the reasons they were not privileged to enter the land. To defend their honour, however, their sins are not made explicit in the biblical text. Their actions at the rock were the proximate rather than underlying cause (a hurricane may be the proximate cause of a bridge collapsing; the underlying cause, however, was a structural weakness in the bridge itself).

More recently, the late Rav Shach zt"l suggested that Moshe may have been justified in rebuking the people, but he erred in the sequence of events. First he should have given them water, showing both the power and providence of God. Only then, once they had drunk, should he have admonished them.

Difficulties, however, remain. The first is that Moshe himself attributed God's refusal to let him enter the land to His anger with the people, not just with himself: "At that time, I pleaded with the Lord: 'O Lord God, You have begun to show Your servant Your greatness and Your mighty hand; what force in heaven or earth can do

deeds and mighty acts like Yours! Please let me cross over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and the Lebanon.' But the Lord was enraged with me because of you, and would not listen to me. (D'varim 3:23)

Similarly, T'hilim 106:32 states, "By the waters of Meriva they angered the Lord and trouble came to Moshe because of them."

Second: however we identify Moshe's sin, there is still a disproportion between it and its punishment. Because of Moshe's prayers, God forgave the Israelites. Could He not forgive Moshe? To deprive him of seeing the culmination of a lifetime's efforts was surely unduly harsh. According to the Talmud, when the angels witnessed Rabbi Akiva's death, they said, "Is this the Torah, and this its reward?" They might have asked the same question about Moshe.

Third is the tantalising fact that, on a previous occasion in similar circumstances, God had specifically told Moshe to take his staff and strike the rock: precisely the act for which (for Rashi and many others) he was now punished:

But the people were thirsty for water. They railed against Moshe, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt? Was it to kill me, my children, and all my livestock by thirst?" "What shall I do

with this people?" Moshe cried to the Lord. "Another moment and they will stone me." The Lord answered Moshe, "Walk out to face the people taking some of the elders of Israel with you. Take the staff with which you struck the Nile in your hand, and go. I will be there before you by the rock at Chorev. Strike the rock; water will come out of it and the people will drink." (Sh'mot 17:3-6)

It is with the deepest trepidation that one hazards a new explanation of so debated a text, but there may be a way of seeing the entire episode that ties the others together and makes sense of what otherwise seems like an impenetrable mystery.

The Talmud (Avoda Zara 5a) contains the following statement of Reish Lakish:

What is the meaning of the verse, 'This is the book of the generations of Adam'? Did Adam have a book? Rather, it teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, showed Adam (in advance), each generation and its interpreters, each generation and its Sages, each generation and its leaders.

One of the most striking features of Judaism is that it is not centred on a single figure - a founder - who dominates its entire history. To the contrary, each age gave rise to its own leaders, and they were different from one another, not only in person-

ality but in the type of leadership they exercised. First came the age of the patriarchs and matriarchs. Then came Moshe and his disciple Yehoshua. They were followed by a succession of figures known generically as Sho-f'tim (Judges), though their role was more military than judicial. With Shaul, monarchy was born - though even then, kings were not the only leaders; there were prophets and kohanim as well. With Ezra a new figure emerges: the 'Scribe', the teacher as hero. Then came elders, Sages, masters of halacha and aggada. During the Mishnaic period the leader of the Jewish people was known as Nasi (and later, in Babylon, as Reish Galuta or Exilarch). Chatam Sofer, in one of his Responsa (Orach Chayim 12) notes that though the Nasi was a scholar, his role was as much political as educational and spiritual. He was, in fact, a surrogate king. The Middle Ages saw the emergence of yet more new types: commentators, codifiers, philosophers and poets, alongside a richly varied range of leadership structures, some lay, some rabbinic, others a combination of both.

Leadership is a function of time. There is a famous dispute about No'ach, whom the Torah describes as 'perfect in his generations'. According to one view, had No'ach lived in a more righteous age, he would have been greater still. According to

another, he would have been merely one of many. The fact is that each generation yields the leadership appropriate to it. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 21b) says that Ezra was worthy of bringing the Torah to Israel, had Moshe not preceded him. In another passage (Menachot 29b) it says that Moshe himself asked God to give the Torah through Rabbi Akiva rather than himself. One can speculate endlessly about the might-have-beens of history, but we are each cast into the world at a time not of our choosing, and we have no choice but to live within its particular challenges and constraints. For that reason, we do not compare leaders, for there are no timeless standards by which to judge them. "Yerubaal in his generation was like Moshe in his generation; Bedan in his generation was like Aharon in his generation; Yiftach in his generation was like Shmuel in his generation."

Each age produces its leaders, and each leader is a function of an age. There may be - indeed there are - certain timeless truths about leadership. A leader must have courage and integrity. He must be able, say the Sages, to relate to each individual according to his or her distinctive needs. Above all, a leader must constantly learn (a king must study the Torah "all the days of his life"). But these are necessary, not sufficient, conditions. A leader must

be sensitive to the call of the hour - this hour, this generation, this chapter in the long story of a people. And because he or she is of a specific generation, even the greatest leader cannot meet the challenges of a different generation. That is not a failing. It is the existential condition of humanity.

The remarkable fact about Moshe 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 Moshe 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 Moshe's 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 Moshe 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.

Moshe's 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. Indeed the whole biblical story of how a short journey took forty years teaches us just this truth. Great change does not take place overnight. It takes more than one generation - and therefore more than one type of leader. Moshe could not become a Yehoshua, just as Yehoshua could not be another Moshe. The fact that at a moment of crisis Moshe 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 Moshe, too, recognised this fact and took the initiative in asking God (in Bamidbar 27) to appoint a successor.

If this interpretation is correct, then Moshe did not sin, nor was he punished. To be sure, the Torah uses language expressive of sin ("You did not believe in Me", "You rebelled against Me", "You trespassed against Me", "You did not sanctify Me"). But these phrases may refer, as several commentators suggest (see the tenth interpretation cited by Abarbanel, and the commentary of Lutzatto) not to Moshe and Aharon but to the people, and the incident as a whole. That would explain why Moshe said that "God was angry with me because of you."

The fact that Moshe was not destined to enter the Promised Land was not a punishment but the very condition of his (and our) mortality. It is also clear why this episode occurs in the sedra of Chukat, which begins with the rite of the Red Heifer and purification from contact with death. We also understand why it follows on the death of Miriam, Moshe and Aharon's sister. Law and narrative are here intricately interwoven in a set of variations on the inevitability of death and the continuity of life. For each of us, there is a Jordan we will

not cross, however long we live, however far we travel. "It is not for you to complete the task", said Rabbi Tarfon, "but neither are you free to disengage from it." But this is not inherently tragic. What we begin, others will complete - if we have taught them how.

Moshe was a great leader, the greatest of all time. But he was also the supreme teacher. The difference is that his leadership lasted for forty years, while his teachings have endured for more than three thousand years (that, incidentally, is why we call him Moshe Rabbeinu, "Moshe our teacher", not "Moshe our leader"). This is not to devalue leadership: to the contrary. Had Moshe only taught, not led, the Israelites would not have left Egypt. The message of the rock is not that leadership does not matter: it is that leadership must be of its time. A teacher may live in the world of ancient texts and distant hopes, but a leader must hear the music of the age and address the needs and possibilities of now.

The great leaders are those who, knowledgeable of a people's past and dedicated to its ideal future, are able to bring their contemporaries with them on the long journey from exile to redemption, neither longing for an age that was, nor rushing precipitously into an age that cannot yet be. And, as Moshe understood more deeply than any other human being,

the great leaders are also teachers, empowering those who come after them to continue what they have begun.

Around the Shabbat Table:

- (1) Moshe made a human error in judgment. Does that make him less impressive to you?
- (2) Consider other leaders from the stories in the Tanach. Which of them had moments that made them seem more human? What did that say about their leadership?
- (3) Can you be a truly great leader without also being humble?

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH