

Hukkat - Moses Hits the Rock - What Happened?
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The story of Moses hitting the rock is troubling on so many levels. What happened? **Summary:** the people are thirsty. They complain. God instructs Moses to **speak to the rock**. Moses **hits the rock**. Water gushes out. The people provide for themselves and their animals. God punishes Moses by banning him from entering the land. We typically conclude the punishment was severe because Moses was a leader and leaders are held to a different standard. This was public insubordination that undermined God. Moses should have known better. We may think that it was too severe, but permanent exile is the same punishment meted out against the generation who rejected God's promise of the land after the report of the scouts. Nevertheless, it still feels over the top. We read this story and think, *Nu, maybe God should have had a little more rachmones on him?* Is there a way to re-read this story? Let's begin our commentary from Moses' reaction to the people's complaint:

ויבא משה ואהרן מפני הקהל אל פתח אהל מועד ויפל על פניהם וירא כבוד ה' אליהם. (במ' כ:ו)
Moses and Aaron came away from the presence of the assembly to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, and flung themselves on their faces. The Glory of God was seen by them (Num. 20:6).

Exasperated, and yet desirous of God's remedy, Moses and Aaron locate themselves at the **entrance of the Tent of Meeting**, a boundary zone that is public and visible to the assembly but not part of the assembly. Everybody can see **God's Glory** but they are not right

next to it. Here are other instances when **God's Glory** appears:

Exod. 16:7, 10	After the Sea of Reeds, prior to Sinai.	In response to their complaints of lack of meat.
Exod. 24:16, 17	After the initial revelation at Mt. Sinai.	When God calls Moses to come up for the tablets.
Exod. 40:34, 35	Upon the completion of the tabernacle.	Everything is ready for the journey to the Land.
Lev. 9:6, 23	The completion of the tabernacle inauguration.	The tabernacle is now ready for use.
Num. 14:10	After the report of the scouts, when the people rejected the land.	To protect Joshua and Caleb and provide reassurance.
Num. 16:19	The Korah episode.	Reassurance to Moses.
Num. 17:7	The immediate aftermath of the Korah episode.	To protect Moses and Aaron from the mob accusations of causing death.

God's Glory is a symbol of liminality. It appears at moments that can be celebratory or disastrous and straddles the boundary of those two outcomes. **The appearance of God's Glory is not the precursor to calamity. Rather, it is God's effort to provide a last layer of protection against the possibility of calamity.** In this instance, **God's Glory**, the boundary symbol, appears in the boundary zone, the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, at a boundary time, the moment between the people's complaint and an anticipated moment of divine power.

וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר. קח את המטה והקהל את העדה אתה ואהרן אחיך.
And God spoke to Moses, saying: Take the staff and assemble the community, you and Aaron your brother.

Whose **staff** was it? If it was Aaron's it could symbolize miracles that were performed in Egypt, or it could be a potent reminder of the people's

contentiousness in the aftermath of the Korah incident. If it was Moses', it could symbolize the miracles performed in the desert including the other time Moses used it to procure water for them (Exod. 17:1-7). **The order to convene the people constitutes an invitation to a grand event. Something big is going to happen. Given that God's Glory is in appearance, the people ought to have felt both awe, protection, and the possibility of a miracle, knowing that there was also a chance for things to go wrong.**

ודברתם אל הסלע לפנינו.
Both of you, you and Aaron are you (plural) are to speak to the rock, and this was to be done publicly.

This is probably the oddest request that God has ever made. But is it really? If we read the text of the people's complaint very closely (we don't have enough room to quote it here in its entirety, see Num. 20:3-5), we actually can take a step back **and admire it for its poetic quality, its cleverness, its artfulness.** Here are a few examples of how the consonantal clusters in their complaint are carefully encoded to create a coherent cohort of claquish quips:

לשחות-למות שם, ותאנה-אתנו, הרע-ובעירנו, ונפן-לפני, אנחנו-אחינו.
 And note the people's most prominent **phonemelet**: the **LM-LM** sound.

למה, אל המדבר, למות, ולמה, אל המקום, לא מקום.²

In other words, the people were being annoying and cheeky, brazen and playful, kvetchy and clever, all at the same time. There is more than just a tint of irony here because God gets it, the close-reader of the text gets it, the listener gets it, **but Moses doesn't get it. So, when God says to Moses speak to the rock, he wants Moses to enter the verbal jousting match, knowing full well, in his total compassion, that he is going to provide water for the people in the end, because he always does. God just wants to elevate Moses and Aaron before the people so that they, with their words, and their own verbal dexterity and competence will emerge victorious and validate their power and authority.** And it's not as if they haven't demonstrated that already. Here are some instances in the book of Numbers where Moses shows his poetic chops:

10:29	נסעים אנחנו אל המקום...	Moses invites Hovav to join him.
10:35	קומה ה' ונפצו איבריך...	The song for the Ark.
11:11	למה הרעת לעבדך...	Moses beseeches God in pain.
11:29	ומי יתן כל עם ה' גביאים...	When prophecy breaks out.
12:13	אל נא רפא נא לה...	Prayer on behalf of Miriam.
13:17-20	עלי זה בנגב ועליתם את ההר...	The charge to the scouts.
16:8	שמעו נא בני לוי...	To the Korahites.

Moses, the man of no words, evidently knows how to slam.

¹ **AHEINU-ANAHNU, GEFEN-LIFNEI, HARA-UVE'IRENU, TE'ENA-OTANU, LAMUT-SHAM-LISHTOT.** The precise technical term for this poetic device is consonance (repetition of consonantal sounds). Other poetic devices in their

complaint: repetition, parataxis, assonance, paronomasia, alliteration, chiasmus, and anaphora.

² **VELAMA, EL-HAMIDBAR, LAMUT, VELAMA, EL-HAMAKOM, LO-MEKOM**

וְנָתַן מִיָּמֶיךָ וְהוֹצֵאתָ לָהֶם מִיָּם מִן הַסֵּלַע.	Until now God spoke to both Moses and Aaron. Now, he only speaks to Moses. This moment is all about Moses. God is setting Moses up here to be the compassionate leader, merciful and beneficent. You Moses are going to make this happen. You
So that it gives forth its water. Thus you (singular) are to bring them out water from the rock.	

are going to bring water out of the rock for them. With words.

וְהִשְׁקִיתָ אֶת הָעֶדָה וְאֶת בְּעִירָם.	This is all about you , Moses. I want you to stand before the people in awe and magnanimity and literally
That you (singular) may give-drink to the assembly and to their cattle.	

dole the water to each Israelite **yourself**. And also, their animals. What a great moment that will be!

וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת הַמֶּטֶשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ.	Everything is going according to God's instructions. It is a large convocation. A
So Moses took the staff from before the presence of God, as he had commanded him.	moment of great dramatic tension But then... suspense...

וַיִּקְהֲלוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶת הָעָם אֶל פְּנֵי הַסֵּלַע.	Instead of speaking to the rock, he yells at the people! Instead of bringing out the water himself, he creates ambiguity with we ! It's a mess!
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And Moses and Aaron assembled the assembly facing the rock.	
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וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם שְׁמְעוּ נָא הַמְּרִים הַזֶּה מִן הַסֵּלַע הַזֶּה וְיֹצֵא לָכֶם מַיִם?	
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He said to them: Now hear, [you] rebels, from this boulder must we bring you out water?	
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This was supposed to be a kind of sacred theater, where Moses was to **perform a poem** to get God's miraculous response.

Perhaps something short and pithy like his prayer over Miriam, or longwinded and verbose like his charge to the scouts. What is so tragic - or ironic - is that even a novice (like me!) could have come up with something acceptable here as an *Ode to the Rock*:

סֵלַע! סֵלַע! תּוֹצֵא מַיִם מִמָּד מַיִם!	Or something more theological like this:
Rock! Rock! Let your waters rush forth!	
סֵלַע הַשְּׁמִיעֵנִי! מִמָּד מַיִם רַבִּים יֵצְאוּ! וְלֵה' קוִינֵנוּ לְיִשׁוּעָה.	Rock! Listen to me! From you, many waters will emerge! And to God, our hope for salvation!

That was the road not taken. Instead, we get the bitter bilious blast: *Now hear you rebels!* And then:

וַיִּרָם מֹשֶׁה אֶת יָדוֹ וַיַּךְ אֶת הַסֵּלַע בְּמֶטֶשׁוֹ פַּעַמַּיִם וַיֵּצְאוּ מַיִם רַבִּים וַתִּשְׁתַּה הָעֶדָה וּבְעִירָם.	God wanted Moses to use words. Moses used violence. God wanted compassion.
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And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock with his staff, twice, so that abundant water came out, and the community and their cattle drank.	Moses delivered anger. God wanted mercy. Moses lashed out with a vengeance. In this reading, God wanted Moses to engage in a verbal joust with the kvetchy but very clever people.
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Instead, Moses gave a lateral lunge with a lance. The rod that was used for miracles, once and until recently a symbol of mystery and awe, was now an implement of shock and awe. Now it was simply a blunt force instrument aimed at a strategic point in a wall of rock where Moses, seasoned desert shepherd that he was, saw the potential of water.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן יֵעָן לֹא הֵאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָכֵן לֹא תָבִיאוּ אֶת הָעָם אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לָהֶם.

Now God said to Moses and to Aaron: Because you did not have trust in me to treat-me-as-holy before the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore: you [two] shall not bring this assembly into the land that I am giving them!

These are among the saddest words in the Bible. Don't read them with anger. Read them with pathos.

Moses, you let me down. I can't tell you how much. It's clear that your time leading this people is done. For the next chapter of Israel's life, I will need someone who not only can speak to rocks but can speak to people as well. You will stay on until the boundary, the Jordan. But you will not go into the land, a land that is characterized by water that literally, and quite miraculously, comes out of rocks in the desert forming springs, rivulets, streams and even the occasional waterfall.



How would talking to the rock have sanctified God?

Simple.

God wanted

to demonstrate his responsiveness to Moses in front of the people as they were assembled, amphitheater-like before the rock. This was to be a dramatic moment that would elicit awe, gratitude, joy and celebration. It would reinforce the bonds of leader and people in an intimate drama of giving and receiving. It would have re-established God as other, compassionate, responsive, all-powerful, and unique, all the things that make God holy. God wanted to be needed, but in that moment, Moses rejected him. The lingering question is why? Why did Moses do it? We could offer several reasons. He was exhausted. Angry. Still in mourning for his sister. Frustrated by the people. Still reeling from the Korah incident. Confused because of the similar incident in Exodus where he hit the rock. Bewildered as to why God was depriving the people of their basic necessities. Or maybe, just maybe, Moses was being tested. This is an inverse of the Akeda. While Abraham held his emotions in check, demonstrating faith, Moses did not, demonstrating defiance. Abraham received God's blessing. Moses was forced to remain in exile. Discuss. Shabbat Shalom!

Day 638. We pray for an end to the war and the return of the hostages. May God comfort the bereaved, protect the IDF, and heal the wounded. AMEN!

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Suzy Levin to commemorate the yahrzeit of her brother, Buzzy, z'l.