

**Hukkat Balak - A Close Reading of Moses Hitting the Rock**  
**Rabbi Eliot Malomet June 27, 2026 12 Tammuz 5786**

Among the more troubling stories in the Torah is the story of Moses hitting the rock at Meribah (Num. 20:7-11). It results in a divine decree that he, together with his silent accomplice Aaron, will not be permitted to enter the land. Let's compare what God said and what Moses did. The differences are highlighted in yellow:

WHAT GOD SAID	WHAT MOSES DID
1 <i>Take the staff</i>	Moses took the staff from before the presence of God, as he had commanded him.
2 <i>and assemble the community, you and Aaron your brother;</i>	And Moses and Aaron assembled the assembly facing the rock.
3 <i>you are to speak to the rock before their eyes so that it gives forth its water.</i>	He said to them: Now hear, [you] rebels,
4 <i>Thus you (Moses) are to bring them out water from the rock,</i>	from this rock must we bring you out water?
5	And Moses raised his hand and struck the boulder with his staff, twice, so that abundant water came out,
6 <i>that you may give-drink to the assembly and to their cattle.</i>	and the community and their cattle drank.
וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר:	
1 ויקח משה את המטה מלפני ה' כאשר צוהו.	1 קח את המטה
2 ויקהל משה ואהרן את הסלע את הקהל אל פני הסלע	2 ויקהל את העדה אתה ואהרן אחיד
3 ויאמר להם: שמעו נא המרים!	3 ודברתם אל הסלע לעיניכם ונתן מימיו
4 המן הסלע הזה נוציא לכם מים?!	4 והוצאת להם מים מן הסלע
5 וירם משה את ידו ויך את הסלע במטהו פעמים ויצאו מים רבים	5
6 ותשת העדה ובעירם.	6 והשקית את העדה ואת בעירם.

Six observations emerge from this close reading.  
**1. Moses exercises Autonomy:** God did not tell Moses where to get the staff. Moses had to reason that God was referring to the miraculous staff of Aaron that he had just deposited in the Tent of Meeting after God made it sprout, flower and produce almonds (Num. 17:16-26). There we read that God told Moses:

השב את־מטה אהרן לפני העדות למשמרת לאות לבני־מרי ותכל תלונתם מעלי ולא ימתו. ויעש משה כאשר צוה ה' אתו כן עשה:  
*Return the staff of Aaron before the Testimony to be safeguarded as a sign for the rebellious-folk, that their grumblings may be finished from me, so that they do*

*not die. Moses did it; as God commanded him, so he did.* (Num. 17:25-26)

Moses understands that the retrieval of the miraculous staff was essential for yet another theatrical event designed to showcase yet another miracle. (Indeed, note the theatrical elements here: Moses and Aaron standing front and center before an audience of the people; a backdrop of a large rock; a heretofore undisclosed script for what they are to say before the rock, and a central prop - the miraculous staff.) For his entire career, God has been telling him what to do. Here, in this moment of high drama, **Moses will decide on his own how he will proceed.**

**2. Moses Decides that He and Aaron will Confront the People as a Team:** God directed Moses *alone* to assemble the community; Aaron was to join him. But when they ended up gathering the people, the text points out specifically that Moses and Aaron assembled the people *together*. In other words, **they assembled the people as a team!** Why? Because when the people started complaining about the lack of water, it says specifically that they approached them *individually*: וניקהלו על משה ועל אהרן - they gathered against Moses and (they gathered) against Aaron - (20:2). The people felt that their divide-and-conquer-move would intimidate them and play one off the other. To counteract that, and to demonstrate a unity of purpose and a unified front against the people, Moses and Aaron joined forces with each other - not exactly as God wanted - and assembled the people *together*.

**3. Moses Spoke to the Rock and not to the People.** In the Korah story - an event that also does not lack for theatricality - Moses stands before the cohort and delivers a speech that basically says, if the earth opens its mouth and swallows the rebels, this will prove that the rebels have scorned God (Num. 16:29-30). Sure enough, immediately afterwards: *the ground that was beneath them (the rebels) split* (Num. 16:31). That's the pattern: a speech then a miracle. In this instance God wanted Moses and Aaron to deliver a speech *to the rock* in front of the people, and at the end of that speech the rock was to deliver the water. Instead, Moses speaks *to the people*. Why? There is no shortage of speculation. Perhaps he was being:

Vindictive	<i>You ungrateful people! I will show you!</i>
Impatient	<i>I have just lost my sister. I don't have the patience to deal with this nonsense!</i>
Rebellious	<i>This is ridiculous! How could God want me to talk to a rock!</i>
Angry	<i>Shame on them! Don't they realize that we're almost there? Now hear, you rebels!</i>

For any or all of these reasons, and perhaps others, (exhaustion?) Moses spoke to the *people* and not to the *rock*.

**4. Moses's Question Subverts God.** God wanted Moses to extract the water by himself. That is the meaning of והוצאת להם -you (singular-Moses) *are to bring water out* for them. But when Moses issues his sharply worded question to the people, he includes Aaron - are *we* going to bring water out

for you? This is defiance. It places daylight between Moses and God and undermines whatever trust the people have had in God. It also signals contempt.

### 5. The Shock and Surprise of Moses Striking the Rock.

There is nothing in what God says to Moses that gives so much as a hint of how Moses will react. It is as if Moses's response comes out of no-



where! And that is precisely the point. We do not anticipate this act. God told them to speak to the rock, and Moses hit it. It shocks us still. It must have shocked the people immensely.

### 6. The People Drank the Water without any Help from Moses.

According to the plan, Moses was to distribute the water personally to the people. There is something quite touching about that. An analogy: As Camp Ramah began this week, I am reminded of our special cookouts.<sup>1</sup> It was Rabbi Resnick's custom to stand at the condiment station and personally dispense the ketchup and mustard to all of the campers. This prevented a mess, of course. But there was a deeper motivation behind it. I asked him once why he insisted on doing it personally and not delegating to someone else. He replied: *This gives me a chance to interact personally with each camper.* And that is the point here. Leaders have few opportunities to interact personally with the people. God wanted Moses to give out the water to each and every Israelite, so that Moses would have an opportunity to interact with every Israelite, however briefly. As a consequence of Moses hitting the rock, they rushed to the water and drank themselves without anyone stewarding them. What a lost opportunity that was!

*Our close reading discloses Moses's defiance, his belligerence, his disobedience, his contempt, his impetuosity, and his failure to seize an opportunity to build his relationship with the people.* As a result of this God tells Moses and Aaron:

יֵעָן לֹא הֶאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי לְהַקְדִּישׁנִי לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָכֵן לֹא תָבִיאוּ אֶת הַקֶּהֱל הַזֶּה אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לָהֶם.

**Because you did not have trust in me to sanctify me before the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore: you [two] shall not bring this assembly into the land that I am giving them.** (Num. 20:12)

Note God's lack of anger or any other signal of displeasure, dismay, or disappointment. This is the power of understatement. Just by reading closely the difference between what God says and what Moses does, we understand how serious their transgression was. *In the Torah as in life, sometimes it is better to leave things unsaid.* When the rabbis read this story closely, they concluded that four sins

were committed. Four is a conventional framing device for rabbinic teaching (for example: Avot 5:10-15).

אַרְבַּע חַטָּאוֹת כְּתוּבִין כְּאֵן: לֹא הֶאֱמַנְתֶּם. לֹא קִדְשַׁתֶּם. מְעַלְתֶּם. מְרִיתֶם.

**There are four sins written in this story: (1) You did not trust. (2) You did not sanctify. (3) You broke faith. (4) You rebelled.**

Note that the first two are *sins of omission* (what you didn't do) and the second two are *sins of commission* (what you did do). The first two sins refer back to the verse just cited: *you did not trust in me to sanctify me* (20:12), But the rabbis elaborate:

לֹא הֶאֱמַנְתֶּם: שְׁלֹא אָמַרְתִּי לָכֶם לְהַכּוֹת וְהַפִּיתָ אוֹתוֹ. וְלֹא קִדְשַׁתֶּם: לְעֵינֵי כָל יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהוֹצִיא לָהֶם מִיָּם מִכָּל סֶלַע שְׂרוּצִיִּם.

**You did not trust: Because I did not tell you to hit the rock and you hit it. You did not sanctify: Before the eyes of all of Israel in extracting for them water from any rock that you wanted.**

The gravity of their transgression is twofold: they didn't trust in God that their words alone would be sufficient to extract the water as God had told them. And second: they missed an opportunity to sanctify God in a public setting. Had they spoken to any rock, they would have been able to create a zone of holiness for God right before their very eyes. Not in a concealed place, like say, the Holy of Holies. Then they explain the two remaining sins:

מְעַלְתֶּם: אָמַרְתָּ הַמֶּן הַסֶּלַע הַזֶּה. מְרִיתֶם: וְדַבַּרְתֶּם אֶל הַסֶּלַע - שְׁנֵה עָלְיוֹ פָּרַק אַחַד. וְעִבַרְתָּ עַל דְּבָרֵי. יִלְקוּט שְׂמַעוֹנֵי תַשְׁסֹד:ג

**You broke faith: You said, Shall we extract water from this rock?! You rebelled: I said, Speak to the rock, meaning that I wanted you to teach just one thing with it. And you transgressed on my word.** Yalkut Shimoni 764:3

These sins are derived from other prooftexts. *you broke faith* comes from the last thing that God says to Moses. He won't be entering the land because...

עַל אֲשֶׁר מְעַלְתֶּם בִּי בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִי מְרִיתֶם קִדְשׁ (דב' לב:נא)  
**...you [both] broke-faith with me in the midst of the Children of Israel at the Waters of Meriba** (Deut. 32:51)

Moses's bitter, subversive question was an act of breaking faith. *you rebelled*-comes prior to Aaron's death where God says, Aaron is banned from the land because...

עַל אֲשֶׁר מְרִיתֶם אֶת פִּי לְמִי מְרִיבָה. (במ' כ:כד)  
**...you [both] rebelled against my orders at the Waters of Meriba.** (Num. 20:24)

They were supposed to speak to the rock but didn't. To the rabbis that meant, they were supposed to engage in the ultimate act of honor: teaching. They missed an opportunity to show and receive honor. And for that, they paid a huge price.  
**Shabbat Shalom!**

**This parasha sheet is sponsored by Cathy, Ben, Jess and Andrew Cohen in honor of the special birthday of Ira Cohen on Shabbat. Mazel Tov!**

<sup>1</sup>On Wednesdays, the kitchen staff would take their day-off. Because of that, there would always be a camp-wide

hamburger-and- hot-dog cook-out on that day, with ketchup, mustard, and relish and pickles, chips and watermelon.