When Everything Starts to Look the Same:
Moses’ Failure
Rabbi Shai Held

It is one of the most enigmatic stories in the Torah—and for many readers, one of the most disturbing as well. For several decades now, Moses has been God’s faithful servant. “The dominant characterization of Moses throughout Numbers has been as an obedient servant of God of heroic proportions, interceding for the people, turning down a chance to become a great nation of his own, welcoming the guidance and help of others, working selflessly for the good of the people.”¹ To be sure, God and Moses have had their stormy moments (e.g. Numbers 11:11-15), but Moses has time and again done just as God commanded. The people have been stubborn and recalcitrant, but despite moments of exasperation, Moses has stood by them—in faithful service both to them and to the God who has chosen him as their leader. Reading the Torah, one imagines Moses yearning for the Israelites’ long-delayed arrival in the Promised Land. After countless tribulations in the desert—after faithlessness and betrayal, after plague and devastation—he longs for the day when, finally, he can lead the people out of the desert and into the place God has set aside for them.

The people have been stubborn and recalcitrant, but despite moments of exasperation, Moses has stood by them.

And then—abruptly, in a single moment—it all falls apart.

The people complain—again—that they are thirsty. They “quarrel with Moses”: In a familiar lament, they yearn for their own

¹ Dennis T. Olson, Numbers (1996), p. 129.
death and ask why Moses and Aaron have led them to this horrible place where they will surely die. Moses and Aaron head to the Tent of Meeting, where they receive instructions from God on how to respond. God instructs Moses, “You and your brother take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes speak to the rock and it shall yield its water. Thus shall you produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts” (Numbers 20:1-8).

Moses starts out doing just as God commands: “Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as God had commanded him” (20:9). The text may be hinting that something is about to go badly awry: Bible scholar Dennis Olson notes that “usually such notices about Moses’ obedience to God’s commands appear at the end of a sequence of actions rather than in the middle of the action, as here.” What has happened until this moment accords with God’s wishes; what will follow, however, is another matter entirely.² Sure enough, what happens next utterly alienates God. “Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he 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” (20:9-11). On one level, the mission has been accomplished: Water has poured forth, and the people’s thirst has been quenched. And yet God is furious, and Moses and Aaron³ pay a very hefty price. “The Lord 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” (20:12-13). Moses and Aaron do not escape the fate of the rest of the older generation; they too will die before reaching to the Promised Land.

² Olson, Numbers, p. 126.
³ The role of Aaron in this story is less than clear. He seems rather passive, and yet he is held responsible and punished along with his brother.
But why? What exactly have they done to earn this tragic and terrible fate? Biblical interpreters both traditional and modern have long been vexed by this question. Not surprisingly, leading Bible scholar Samuel David Luzzatto (Shadal, 1800-1865) observes wryly that “Moses our teacher committed one sin, but the exegetes have loaded upon him thirteen sins and more, since each of them has invented a new sin” (Commentary to Numbers 20:12). Despite all that has been written, it seems fair to say that “the passage of time has done little to overcome the enigma associated with [Moses’ and Aaron’s] disqualification.”

Broadly speaking, it makes sense to divide interpretations of Moses’ sin into three categories:

1) those who argue that Moses sins in how he addresses the people: “Listen, you rebels”;
2) those who contend that the question he asks the people—“shall we get water for you out of this rock?”—is the source of offense; and
3) those who insist that his action—striking the rock instead of speaking to it—is his crime.

A definitive interpretation of Moses’ failing is likely to remain elusive. In any case, it may well be that his tragic and fateful misstep is in fact multi-faceted: In a fit of frustration and anger, he stumbles in more than one way. He speaks to the people with unbridled and inappropriate harshness; he talks as if he and Aaron rather than God are the source of water; and he hits instead of using words. None of this is in keeping with God’s command.

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Let’s focus on one crucial aspect of Moses’ sin: The heated and indignant way he speaks to the people.

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Numbers details a seemingly endless litany of disheartening and infuriating moments between Moses and Israel. The people grumble constantly, often with no real reason (11:1-3). Despite being fed, they complain that the food is boring and that it does not measure up to the delicacies available in Egypt (11:4-6). So pervasive is the culture of complaint that even Moses’ siblings fall prey to it, giving voice to their own jealousy of Moses’ uniquely elevated status (12:1-3). At God’s instruction, Moses sends spies to scout out the land and its inhabitants. They bring back a discouraging report and again the people rebel, expressing an urgent desire to head back to Egypt (13:1-14:4). A family of Levites orchestrates a mutiny against Moses’ and Aaron’s leadership (16:1-3), and when the earth swallows the rebels, the people blame Moses and Aaron for their deaths (17:5). In each of these cases, we encounter a familiar pattern: Illegitimate complaint on the part of the people elicits frustration on the part of Moses and anger and punishment on the part of God. By the time we arrive at our chapter, “readers are conditioned to assume that any complaint here by the people is a sign of sinful rebellion—not only against Moses and Aaron but also against God. We are primed to believe [that] the people are deserving of divine judgment whenever they complain… Every time we hear the first hint of whining from the people… we automatically assume that the people’s complaint is illegitimate, that the attack on Moses and Aaron is unjustified, and that God’s anger and righteous judgment on the people will follow like clockwork.”

More importantly, Moses seems to assume precisely the same thing. If the people are grumbling, it must just be more of the same. The problem is, Numbers subtly suggests, is that he (and we) are wrong.

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*Olson, Numbers, p. 125.*
However tempted both Moses and we may be to imagine that the people’s complaining in this instance is without basis or merit, the text quietly indicates otherwise. Our story begins with the narrator—crucially, not the people—informing us that “the community was without water” (20:2). Although the people do express the now-all-too-familiar wish that they were dead or back in Egypt, the fact remains that their complaint is legitimate: Their lament, “there is no water to drink” (20:5), corresponds to the facts as the narrator reports them.

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As we’ve seen, when Moses and Aaron hear the people’s complaint, they head for the Tent of Meeting to await God’s response, probably expecting another explosion of God’s anger—perhaps even hoping to take comfort in the idea that God shares their irritation with the people. And yet God responds without any hint of ire. Instead, God simply offers instructions for how to provide the people with water (20:7-8).

But Moses is angry even if God is not. It is interesting to speculate: Is the pattern of the people’s rebellion and God’s irritation so well established in Moses’ consciousness that he simply takes God’s rage for granted and misses God’s very different cue? Or, on the contrary, does Moses perceive God’s patience in this instance only too clearly and experience hurt, disappointment, and alienation as a result? Does God’s lack of anger only make an already outraged Moses even angrier? Bible scholar Ronald Allen suggests that Moses was distressed by God’s failure to respond angrily to the people’s complaint. “It is almost as though [Moses] thought,” Allen writes, that “it was necessary to do the work of vengeance himself; hence his harsh, condemnatory words, his sarcasm, and his blows against the rock.”

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If Allen is right, then there is something almost unbearably ironic about Moses’ response. Bible scholar Richard Boyce astutely notes that Moses, who has time and again appealed to God’s mercy on behalf of the people (e.g. 14:17-19), now finds himself exasperated by that very mercy. It is as if, in this one raging moment, Moses has become Jonah, unable to countenance God’s patience and forbearance.8

A close reading of the text indicates that God is displeased with how Moses addresses the people—and not just, say, with Moses’ hitting the rock instead of speaking to it. Recall that Moses refers to them disparagingly as “you rebels” (ha-hmorim) (20:10). Just a few verses later, God employs the very same root in explaining why Moses and Aaron will die before reaching the land: “Because you rebelled (meritem) against My word about the waters of Meribah” (20:24). Moreover, when the narrator frames the story, he speaks of the people “quarreling,” first with Moses (20:3), then with God (20:13). “But quarreling is not necessarily rebellion.”9 Moses and Aaron conclude from the people’s quarreling that they must be rebels, but God considers that rash conclusion itself the true act of rebellion.

Some scholars insist that calling the people “rebels” cannot be a sin, since God calls the people by that very name a mere three chapters earlier (17:25).10 And yet context is

8 Richard N. Boyce, Leviticus and Numbers (2008), p. 190. And yet both Allen and Boyce seem to miss the fact that God’s response is rooted at least in part in God’s sense that the people’s need is real—even if their mode of expressing it is less than ideal. So concerned are Allen and Boyce to emphasize the role of God’s grace in the story that they miss a subtle but crucial note of complexity the Torah itself introduces: The people’s demand for water is legitimate.

9 Olson, Numbers, p. 128.

everything. An appropriate response in one situation may be totally unacceptable in another. Emotional wisdom and maturity depend on the capacity to distinguish between two experiences that may seem similar on the surface but are in fact quite different.

What exactly underlies Moses’ and Aaron’s failure?

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**We too quickly conclude that the people we are dealing with are behaving “as they always do,” and as a result, we stop taking them seriously.**

When patterns of behavior emerge, it is extremely easy to fall into a trap: We assume that what is happening now is just another instance of what has already happened countless times before. We too quickly conclude that the people we are dealing with are behaving “as they always do,” and as a result, we stop taking them seriously. Think of a parent who cannot hear her child speak because she has already decided that the child always says the same thing, or of a teacher who responds to a student with the overconfident assurance that the child’s actions are just the latest example of the same old problematic pattern of behavior. In moment such as these, when we become jaded and impatient, we lose the ability (or willingness) to see the uniqueness of the situation before us. When we assume that everything is familiar, we forfeit the capacity to respond appropriately, in a way that God and the moment call for. “The accumulated anger and frustration of forty years bear down on Moses”¹¹ and he simply cannot see or hear the people anymore. He is so incensed, and so emotionally frayed, that, the Torah subtly indicates, he cannot really hear God anymore either.¹²

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¹² So caught is Moses in familiar patterns that perhaps he imagines that this instance of complaint about water is exactly the same as the one that had taken place earlier, in Exodus. In that case, God had instructed Moses to strike the rock in order to draw forth water (Exodus 17:6). Wisdom requires not just discerning similarities between experiences but also detecting differences between them. For a fascinating argument based on
And so, tragic as the situation is, God realizes that God must find someone else—because when all is said and done, you cannot lead people you disdain, and you cannot guide people you can no longer even really see. According to Numbers, what God still has, but Moses has lost, is the ability to respond empathically even to this stiffnecked people. When anger crowds out the possibility of empathy, it is time for a new leader.

Shabbat shalom.

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“narrative geography” for why God might have given different instructions in the two cases, see Beck, “Why Did Moses Strike Out?”