

The Waters of Meribah – Anger, Loss, and Forgetting – Parashat Chukat 5782

One day this past week I was in the grocery store and Ken called me with a question, I was in a hurry, I had a lot to do and I was already behind schedule. I was in the grocery aisle pushing the cart, and to answer his question I had to stop everything I was doing, look up something for him, and that was going to slow me down and impede my ability to get to where I need to be after I finished at the grocery store. Let's just say it was a situation in which I wasn't too very patient. My response was to be a little gruff and a little angry, annoyed at the interruption. But his question was a valid one and I was the only one that could answer it and it too had a time constraint. Fortunately just a moment later a voice in my head reminded me to slow down, and just breathe. Then I was able to help him, but I must admit, that was only after grumbling on my part. I am grateful Ken is patient and did not take my grumbling personally.

In this week's Torah portion, the second generation of Israelites, wandering in the desert are getting closer and closer to the Promised Land. The generation of slavery has died out, and the next generation, those who have never known slavery, have been born. This story's setting follows the instructions in the Torah of the red heifer ritual, the laws of corpse contamination, and the death of their sister Miriam.

And here, Moses, still after all this time, is leading the people to the Promised Land. Miriam is always connected to the availability of water, granted on account of her righteousness, and when she dies, there is a water crisis, the Israelites grumble and complain about the lack of water in the wilderness, and so Moses and his brother Aaron turn to God for guidance, who instructs them to gather the people and command the rock before them to produce water.

God instructs Moses, "You and your brother Aaron should take the rod and assemble the community. Before their very eyes order the rock to issue forth its water. In this way you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drinks for the congregation and their livestock. 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?" Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came an abundance of water, and the community and its livestock drank. But God said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust me

enough to affirm my sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.” (Numbers 20:7-12)

So this is the sin of Moses. But what exactly did Moses do that he was unable to lead them into the Promised Land?

The most accepted opinion as to what the sin of Moses was is that he sinned by not speaking to the rock, as God had instructed, and that instead, Moses struck the rock. Although bringing forth water from a rock by striking it is certainly miraculous, Moses and Aaron squander the opportunity to perform an even greater miracle of producing water from the rock by speaking to it.

Maimonides says it was something different. He claims it was the language Moses used. He spoke too sharply to the people, after all, the people were thirsty, at the brink of death, they simply wanted to restore themselves. So, according to Maimonides, a leader should not lose their temper. Thus, Moses and Aaron’s behavior was considered reprehensible in divinely appointed leaders.

Other commentators say that it is because he calls the people “defiant ones”, and once Moses loses his temper and voices personal frustrations in front of the Israelites, he lost his connection to God. This is consistent with the opinion of our Mussar masters, who teach that when we become angry, it is a form of self-worship, the putting one’s self above others and above God, and is a form of idol worship. The fact that Moses strikes the rock not once but twice, is indicative that he acted out of anger.

Along these lines, the Zohar, a mystical midrash on the Torah teaches: “The acts of the leader are the acts of the nation. If the leader is just, the nation is just; if the leader is unjust, the nation too is unjust and is punished for the sin of the leader.”

We may wonder now, what does all this have to do with me?

Well, whether it is you or I getting stressed out from errands, or a myriad of other reasons and situations, it is a normal thing in life to feel annoyance, stress, and even anger.

But our Torah comes to teach us to remember that we can rise above this, and as our Mussar masters teach, to shorten the time it takes between the upset and the remembering our higher self, and the response we actually want to have. We do this through reflection, including journaling, noting the times we have remembered to respond in the ways that we want to, and noting the times we weren't so good about it, and striving to improve. Learning about character traits including patience and anger, often studying with a study partner, and practicing patience, and traits such as compassion. It is a lifelong process, which includes knowing ourselves, including what our "hot" buttons are, as we all have them, and how to exercise restraint in the face of situations that try our patience and in which we find ourselves getting angry. Our Jewish tradition teaches us that we can change, throughout our lives, our habits, responses, character, is not fixed at some point, never to change, but rather something we can work on and develop all our lives.

One more observation about Moses striking the rock, twice, and not following God's instructions precisely. You may have noticed that Moses and Aaron's sister Miriam had just died. When we are stressed, we have a tendency to behave less well. It is precisely in such a time that we need to care for ourselves and take the time we need, to be compassionate with ourselves, and in Moses and Aaron's case, to mourn. It is worth realizing too, that under stress, we are more likely to do the equivalent of Moses striking the rock twice. If we realize this, we may have access to restraining ourselves before we do or say something we wish we had not.

I think that if we look, we as a nation, and as a world, have had a lot to deal with and to mourn over the last two and a half years. I don't think I need to list them, but I want to validate your list.

A loss does not necessarily mean a death. A loss can be a lost opportunity, an unmet expectation, a breakup with a friend, a friend moving away, even losing an ability that we once had, and the gradual loss of health. These often go unspoken or even unnoticed, but weigh on us nevertheless.

I don't think anyone is saying that God should have given Moses a pass on his striking the rock twice, but we still may wonder if the consequences of not being allowed to cross over into the Promised Land is fair. Or perhaps it is beyond us to be able to grasp quite what the sin was, as Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz z"l, noted, "Any

sin whose severity can be grasped by an ordinary person is unsuitable for the towering figure of Moses. Presumably, the actions of Moses pertained to some sublime realities beyond our perception. Whatever Moses did would not have been considered a very severe transgression by us. Moses, however, was judged according to his lofty level.”

God, let me take a moment, a breath,
So I may be the best person I can be
Let me always remember my connection
To You, whatever You are,
A higher power, a Source,
Cause of being.
Allow me to calm myself
In the midst of chaos,
Or simply a chaotic moment,
Allow me to recognize You
Within everyone I meet
Let me see the holiness in life
Let me wonder and wander
With You, guided yet free
To grow, to learn, to strive, to love
With each breath you grant me.
Amen

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Lisa Bock