

This week's parsha is one of the most important in the entire Torah. It is the parsha in which God informs Moses that he will not enter the Promised Land. So much can be said about this subject, and in fact, the Torah returns to this topic several times more before the Torah's conclusion. The three questions that arise for me as I consider this incident are:

1. What did Moses do wrong?
2. Was his punishment disproportionate?
3. Why did Moses make the mistake that he did?

Before we answer the questions, let's make sure we understand the story correctly. .

"The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there.

*The scene begins with the death of Miriam. As Rashi teaches, Miriam was accompanied by a well throughout bnei Yisrael's wanderings in the wilderness. With her death, the well also ceased to exist.*

"The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron. The people quarreled with Moses, saying, 'If only we had perished when our brothers perished at the instance of the LORD! Why have you brought the LORD's congregation into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die there? Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!'"

*These complaints are by now familiar to us. This is the third occurrence of such complaints in the last ten chapters of Numbers. The first was the incident of the scouts and the second was the incident of Korah;*

"Moses and Aaron came away from the congregation to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and fell on their faces. The Presence of the LORD appeared to them, and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts.'"

*Note carefully the specificity of God's instruction. First, Moses must take the rod in hand. Second, he must assemble the community, and third he must order the rock to yield water.*

"Moses took the rod from before the LORD, as He had commanded him. 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?'"

*This is the moment of Moses' error. Rather than speak to the rock, he speaks to the congregation. What he says to the congregation is replete with impatience and even anger. Moses also indicates that he and Aaron, not God will extract water from the rock, for he says, "Shall WE get water for you..."*

"And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank. But 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.'

Although he effected the desired outcome, the means Moses used were not consistent with the instructions he received. Rather than speak to the rock, he strikes it, and he strikes it twice.

Having reviewed the relevant passage, we can now reflect on what Moses did wrong.

*What do you think he did wrong?*

- a) Moses did not follow God's instruction*
- b) He accredited himself and Aaron with the success of drawing water from the rock.*
- c) He struck the rock rather than speak to it*
- d) He struck the rock twice*
- e) He lambasted the people*

*That's at least five mistakes that Moses made.*

Now that we know how Moses sinned, we have to turn to God's punishment. God punished Moses by declaring that he had forfeited his right to enter the Land of Israel.

*Was this a fair punishment?*

- a) It was excessive. Moses was God's loyal servant, and he made one mistake. His dream of entering the Promised Land was suddenly dashed*
- b) The punishment was fair. Moses was God's confidante, yet he refused to credit God with the miracle of water. He demonstrated anger and impatience toward his people in their time of need.*

Finally, we turn to the third question: Why did Moses make this mistake? Moses has demonstrated time and again enormous patience with the people. His ability to be long-suffering is unparalleled. He intercedes on their behalf with God when He seeks to punish them. Moses is completely out of character in this episode.

Why couldn't he maintain his normal equilibrium. A problem arose, God had given him a solution, and all he had to do was execute.

*Why do you think Moses faltered in this instance?*

- a) *The answer lies in what precipitated the demand for water. Miriam's death not only deprived Israel of its well, it also deprived Moses of his sister. The death of a loved one can disorient a person. The Torah mentions no period of mourning. For all we know, this incident took place the very same day that Miriam died. Moses was filled with grief, and it distorted his character. He missed his sister, perhaps he even had feelings of guilt about her being afflicted with leprosy during the incident with the Cushite woman.*

Each of the three questions

1. What did Moses do wrong?
2. Was his punishment disproportionate?
3. Why did Moses make the mistake that he did?

Has been answered satisfactorily. Nonetheless, we may still be distressed by the incident. Surely we would hope that God would not punish for one mistake. Yet in some sense, Moses had to be denied entry to the Promised Land. Had he not been, then the people would never have learned to recognize that God had in fact brought them into the Promised Land. The flesh and blood person – someone they could see – Moses would have been credited with the achievement. Perhaps here we can resolve one of the problems that the Torah presents in its account of this incident. If God did not want Moses to strike the rock, why did he tell him to take the rod. In all likelihood, this instruction was given to test Moses. When we have the power to use force to achieve our objective, we are inclined to use it. A true master of himself, however, is capable of having access to the means of force but seeking alternative, non-violent means for achieving his objective.

Much more can be said about this incident. The commentators themselves put forward a variety of opinions, each one disagreeing with the next. Learning from this incident is awful difficult. Moses is so far beyond what any of us are that we can hardly imagine the nature of his task and can't fathom how that awesome responsibility could also mean that God would chastise him severely. Those whom God loves, He chastises and chastises immediately. This is how God relates to Israel and how God related to Moses.