Talking to a Rock: Thoughts for Parashat Hukkat

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This week's Parasha includes one of the most perplexing episodes in the Torah. The Israelites complain bitterly that they have no water to drink, that they will die of thirst, that they should have remained in Egypt rather than suffer such a terrible fate. God tells Moses and Aaron to gather the people, to speak to a rock, and that water would come forth from the rock to quench the people's thirst.

Moses calls the people "rebels," smites the rock twice, and water emerges in abundance. God then informs Moses and Aaron that their lack of faith led to their not sanctifying God's name in the presence of the Israelites. "Therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them." Moses and Aaron are condemned to die in the wilderness, but neither utters a word of protest or apology to God. Our commentators try to explain why Moses and Aaron received such a heavy punishment.

What was their sin? Some suggest that the sin consisted in Moses' losing his temper and calling the people rebels. Some suggest that the sin was that Moses smote the rock rather than speaking to it as God had commanded. Some suggest that Moses and Aaron gave themselves credit for bringing forth the water, rather than attributing the miracle to God. Perhaps there is another way of understanding this episode. We need to study this story in light of the verses that come immediately before: "And the children of Israel, even the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month; and the people abode in Kadesh; and Miriam died there and was buried there. And there was no water for the congregation, and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron" (Bemidbar 20:1-2).

The Midrash connects the death of Miriam with the lack of water. As long as she was alive, her merit was so great that a well miraculously accompanied the people. Once she died, that well ceased to give water and the people therefore became thirsty. The Midrash is highlighting the significance of Miriam. She was a key leader of Israel and was gifted with prophecy.

Yet, when she died, the Torah tersely reports that she was buried. There is no mention of the Israelites mourning her death. (By contrast, at the deaths of Aaron and Moses, the Torah indicates a national thirty day mourning period.) Not only did the people not seem to appreciate the lifelong service of Miriam, they are not reported as having offered any words of consolation to her brothers, Moses and Aaron. The people didn't seem to care much about Miriam's passing, and did not seem to associate her virtue with the existence of the water well that had accompanied them in the wilderness. The people were thirsty; they were not concerned about the death of Miriam or the grief of Moses and Aaron.

When the Israelites complained, then, Moses and Aaron were deeply disappointed and pained. Not only should the people have had more faith in God, Who had been providing for them throughout their years in the wilderness; the people should have shown appreciation to Miriam! How could they be so callous? How could they ignore all that she had done for them? How could they lack the elementary decency to mourn her passing and to express condolences to her brothers? So Moses and Aaron were personally hurt and angered. The people had not only betrayed God, but had betrayed Moses and Aaron.

When Moses and Aaron assembled the people to bring forth water from the rock, they were not in a calm state of mind. They were bitter, disappointed and angry. God told Moses to speak to the rock, as though to say: "Moses, I know you are frustrated and angry, but don't let your personal feelings get in the way of your service to the people. Speak to them. Explain your concerns. Teach them to respect Miriam's memory." But Moses was too distraught to heed this divine guidance. He lashed out at the people, calling them rebels. He smote the rock rather than speaking to it. Moses let his anger get the best of him.

Aaron, as Moses' accomplice in this episode, apparently shared Moses' feelings and concurred with his words and actions. So this was the great "sin" of Moses and Aaron: letting their personal grief and frustration overtake their reason and sense of responsibility to the people. They could have sanctified God's name by speaking with the people, by reminding them of God's miraculous provision of water through the merit of Miriam. Instead, their anger dominated them, and they lost the opportunity to teach an important lesson to the Israelites. God never promised Moses and Aaron that they would lead the people into the Promised Land. Their deaths in the wilderness, like Miriam's, need not be interpreted as a punishment for a particular sin. Indeed, the Pirkei Avot (5:8) lists Moses' burial site as among ten things that God had created on the eve of the first Sabbath.

This indicates that the Almighty had known and planned well in advance that Moses would die in the wilderness, before entering the Promised Land. This had nothing to do with sin and punishment. However, this episode demonstrates that their terms of leadership had come to an end. Once they allowed their personal feelings to take control, it was time to pass leadership to others who could remain more dispassionate and above the fray.

Moses and Aaron were simply too disappointed with the people to continue as effective leaders and teachers. When God informed Moses and Aaron that they would not lead the people into the Promised Land, neither raised a word of protest or apology. They fully understood that their terms of office were drawing to a close, and they were ready to pass on the mantle of leadership to others. At that moment, they may well have felt a sense of relief and gratitude.

Angel for Shabbat