Moses' Sin: Thoughts on Hukkat-Balak

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Angel for Shabbat, Hukkat-Balak

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Perhaps the most tragic feature of the Torah narrative is that Moses dies having never entered the land of Israel. Despite having led the people for over 40 years on their journey to the promised land, and despite his heart-breaking pleas to God, Moses never steps foot in Israel. This is a direct result of his actions in this week's parasha, Hukat.

Facing a lack of water and a people once again expressing a suicidal mindset, Moses is commanded by God to speak to a rock, from which water would miraculously flow. But, instead of speaking to it, Moses strikes the rock. In the very next verse, God reprimands Moses, stating, “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” (Numbers 20:12).

The most straightforward explanation of Moses’ sin, as put forth by Rashi, is that the act of striking the rock constituted the sinful act. But both Rambam and Ramban disagree, instead attributing Moses’ punishment to the preceding verse: “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”” (Numbers 20:10)? They assert that the sin of Moses was in his rebuke of the nation, calling them “rebels,” thus demonstrating Moses’ anger, which, as Ramban explains, “only comes from the bad characteristics of the characteristics of the soul.”

R. Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, in his Kedushat Levi, describes two modes of rebuke. The first praises the subjects and reminds them of their exalted status in the eyes of God, “a fact that makes it their duty not to go astray.” The second

approach stresses the punishments one will incur for transgressions. In this model, “the preacher relies on the feelings of shame in every individual.” Moses chose the latter approach, belittling the people, rather than uplifting them. This was his sin. It was not simply the act of striking the rock, but of admonishing the people’s unfaithfulness in an incorrect fashion.

The act of rebuke has strong precedent in Judaism. Not only is rebuke an explicit biblical command, but the primary role of the prophets throughout biblical history is to serve as a social critic. The notion that “all Israel are sureties for one another” means that all Jews bear responsibility for the sins of their fellows, and therefore must work to prevent any Jew from sinning. But how one rebukes, too, is of central importance. Rambam, in codifying the laws of rebuke, states that one must speak “patiently and gently, informing him that he is only making these statements for his colleague's own welfare, to allow him to merit the life of the world to come.”

I think this insight proves especially relevant as many bemoan the state of civil discourse in America and around the world. It is easy to call people out, to tell them that what they are doing is wrong, stupid or counterproductive. It is especially easy to do it in a way that shames the others, that belittles them, that makes them feel devalued. The challenge is to disagree in a way that values the other, that inspires instead of shames. But if for all the greatness of Moses, he sinned in this matter, how much more does this present a challenge for us?

By seeing others as created in the image of God, we must realize that our goal is to perfect others, not put them down just because we disagree with them. Respect and civility, empathy and compassion, must be the starting points of rebuke and disagreement. How we communicate is just as important as the content we are communicating. Until we learn to engage in discourse that is truly civil, we, too, will be stuck on the precipice of our promised land, unable to progress together toward a greater society.

Angel for Shabbat