

like those between humans, where communication can lead to mutuality and trust but is also prone to failures that can have dire consequences.

Balaam's interaction with the donkey is an example of the failure that leads to suffering when someone isn't listening. The donkey knows something about God and tries to communicate that to her human. But she's in the frustrating position of being unable to use human language to share what she knows. Instead she uses another form of communication—bodily movement—moving three times to avoid the angel. Balaam should have “gotten” that something unusual was happening. As the donkey herself points out after God enables her speech, she's been carrying Balaam for a long time and she's never done anything similar before. But each time she moves, Balaam becomes angry and lashes out in violence. The problem is not that she can't speak his language; it is his unwillingness to really understand hers.



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Taking the Long View: Lessons of Leadership

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The iconic story in our parashah of Moses striking the rock to bring forth water for the People of Israel is often framed as a morality tale, the consequence of a toxic—and disastrous—combination of unchecked rage and faltering faith. Indeed, God doles out the harshest possible punishment to Moses for flouting God's directive to speak to the rock, in full display of the congregation: “Since you did not have faith in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly to the Land which I have given them” (Num. 20: 12).

Yet in fixating on the split-second impulse of Moses's lost temper, we miss out on a broader leadership lesson. I would like to shift our focus to Moses's inability earlier in the narrative to take in stride the relentless complaint of the thousands in his charge. The people were thirsty, tired, scared, and fearful of the big changes that lay ahead; with discomfort and anxiety reaching unbearable heights, they accuse Moses of making their lives worse by taking them from Egypt: “If only we had died with the death of our brothers before the Lord . . . Why have you brought the congregation of the Lord to this desert so that we and our livestock should die there? Why have you taken us out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place . . .” (3–5). Certainly, Moses must have felt despondent, unappreciated, and furious, as “Moses and Aaron moved away from the assembly to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and they fell on their faces” (6).

We can craft a leadership timeline that already was doomed to end poorly the moment Moses reacts to these harsh words by falling on his face.

Moses's job as a leader is to know that the People are worried and scared, and then to do what the People cannot do—to take the long view and see the big picture. To say, "I know you are thirsty and scared, and I am finding a solution. I am sorry you are suffering. Hang in there, and I'll get back to you"—and then to walk away and find that solution, understanding that the people might not ever appreciate his efforts. Moses was challenged to rise above the complaints, but instead he takes them personally, as evident when he calls the congregation together in front of the rock "and he said to them, 'Now listen, you rebels, can we draw water for you from this rock?'" (10).

Perhaps God punished Moses because despite seeing all of his phenomenal leadership qualities, God did not trust that Moses would be able to take the long view that was needed to transition the People to the state of autonomy and freedom that awaited across the Jordan river. Anyone who has ever led a classroom, a teen tour, a parenting listserv, a board retreat, an organization, or a family meeting can relate to Moses's tendency to feel overwhelmed, to want to run and hide when the challenge is set at a very high bar. And yet, leaders do not have that luxury; as Brené Brown states in *Daring Greatly*: "A lot of cheap seats in the arena are filled with people who never venture onto the floor. They just hurl mean-spirited criticisms and put-downs from a safe distance . . . But when we're defined by what people think, we lose the courage to be vulnerable. Therefore, we need to be selective about the feedback we let into our lives" (4).

Moses might have had a different reaction, as he stood at the rock, had he held the deep knowledge that dissatisfaction is inevitable, as is the desire to go back to the way things were even if "the way things were" did not favor the collective best interest. He was an extraordinary leader, but in falling on his face and then naming the People as rebels, Moses allowed them to fill the "cheap seats" to which Brown refers and in the process sunk to their level. Perhaps God saw from his reaction to the congregation at their moment of complaint that despite all of his successes, he was not the leader to bring the People home.

We can learn leadership lessons from our parashah that will help us prevail in times of crisis of COVID and beyond, get ahead of short-term

thinking, and always keep an eye on the big picture. The long view is not always understood or appreciated. As we saw from the People of Israel, it is often unwelcomed and outright rejected. Despite this, leaders need to hold steady and "stay in the arena," as this steadiness can carry an anxious people through.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Listening to Lions

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[Lions] have personalities, temperaments, moods, and they can be voluble about all this, sometimes chatty, sometimes (when they are working) radiating a more focused informativeness. Nor are the exchanges and the work in question suffering-free. In particular, they are not free of the suffering that accompanies failures of understanding, refusals and denials of the sort that characterize many relationships.

Vicki Hearne, *Animal Happiness: A Moving Exploration of Animals and Their Emotions* (172–173)

While Balaam's donkey is notable for being one of only two animals who speak in the entire Tanakh (the other being the serpent in Gen. 2), to me, and probably to any human with a companion animal, it's clear that the donkey begins talking well before God opens her mouth. Based on her research on the relationship between lions and their trainers, scholar Vicki Hearne has argued that animals and humans do converse, but spoken words make up only a part of that communication; there are also gestures, postures, and forms of physical contact. Blurring the sharp line between humans and animals (for which language often serves as strong evidence), Hearne imagines interspecies relationships as being very much