

are tied to how you feel about your brothers and sisters. In one Swedish study, satisfaction with sibling contact in one's 80s was closely correlated with health and positive mood—more so than was satisfaction with friendships or relationships with adult children. And loneliness was eased for older people in a supportive relationship with their siblings, no matter whether they gave or got support.

—Robin Marantz Henig, “Your Adult Siblings May Be The Secret To A Long, Happy Life,” NPR (website), November 2014

The powerhouse sibling triumvirate of Aaron, Miriam, and Moses figures prominently from the beginning of Exodus all the way through this week's parashah, where we read about the deaths of Moses's illustrious brother and sister. In the hurly-burly of the exodus and wilderness narratives we may be tempted to overlook the evolving portrayal of the sibling relationship dynamics among these pivotal family members. Yet who would deny that Moses's roles as prophet, teacher, judge, and right-hand man to God would have been unimaginable without the support of, collaboration with, and challenges posed by his older brother and sister?

From a psychological perspective, this week's parashah further underscores, if indirectly, the effect of this tight sibling bond, through the response of the people to the deaths of Aaron and Miriam. In so doing, the Torah invites its readers to contemplate the crucial nature that sibling relationships occupy—certainly within the intimacy of families, but also in the ways these relationships often reverberate beyond the family nest.

The Torah never suppresses or ignores the tensions among Aaron, Miriam, and Moses. But these difficulties were overcome, and in the long arc of their lives together, they displayed an admirable degree of closeness, collaboration, and connection. The bonds that Aaron, Miriam, and Moses forged with each other offer us a way of thinking about the significance of generational legacy in Judaism, expanding the concept beyond that which gets transmitted from parent to child across a generational divide, to that which moves from sibling to sibling within the same generation.

Hukkat 5777

חוקת תשע"ז



Striking Out or Stepping Up: A Leadership Model for Our Times

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“Moses entered the stage of Jewish history by striking (the Egyptian) and exited from the stage of Jewish history by striking (the rock).” This startling observation by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin in his commentary on the Book of Numbers (*Torah Lights: Bemidbar*, 169) causes us to reflect deeply on the subject of Jewish leadership.

Narrative symmetry, of course, is a characteristic of both biblical literature and rabbinic interpretation. It suggests purpose over randomness—a meaningful connection between beginnings and endings. Here, however, the symmetry is ironic, even disquieting. Moses's entry onto the stage of Jewish history is through killing another human being; his forced exit is the result of hitting an inanimate object. The killing is viewed in a positive light, both within the biblical narrative itself and in rabbinic interpretation; it is a reflection of Moses's courage and concern for his oppressed people. The assault on the rock, on the other hand, is condemned in the harshest terms and results in Moses's exclusion from entry into the Promised Land, even though the act caused no harm to life or limb. Moses becomes a Jewish leader with an act of violence and loses that role through a trivial act of pique.

But let's dig deeper. The killing of a taskmaster is a type-scene of slave narratives from Spartacus to Nat Turner. What distinguishes the biblical story is who committed the killing and the aftermath. In the usual narrative of slave revolt, a slave kills one or more overlords and then immediately assumes leadership of the rebellion. In the biblical story, it is not a slave who commits the act of violence, but rather a prince of Egypt, Moses. What is more, he does not lead an immediate revolt, but rather flees to the wilderness, the scene of spiritual awakening.

Two of the hallmarks of great leadership begin to come into view: empathy and deep reflection. Even in his exalted position, Moses radically empathizes

with the oppressed slave. A connection is made which goes well beyond sympathy to identification. Leadership is not merely an intellectual enterprise, but also a deeply emotional one. At the same time, leadership requires contemplation rather than spontaneous reactions. It requires humility and quiet introspection before the mantle of leadership can truly be carried with dignity and effectiveness.

And yet it is not the beginning of Moses's leadership mission, but its supposed end, that is the concern of this week's parashah, Hukat. Is it really the case, as Rabbi Riskin suggests, that Moses exited the stage of Jewish history by striking the rock to obtain water for B'nei Yisrael? Although many children learn in Hebrew school that Moses was punished because he hit the rock with his staff rather than speaking to it as commanded by God, Nahmanides categorically rejects this theory. He notes that God explicitly had directed Moses to "take his staff," and that direction in and of itself implied that he should strike the rock. Elsewhere in the Torah—particularly in the narrative of the ten plagues—God orders Moses to take his staff, always with the purpose of striking with it. Why should Moses have thought differently in this situation? In any case, the miracle of water from the rock was not diminished in the least by Moses hitting the rock rather than speaking to it.

Numerous other explanations have been offered as to what really constituted Moses's sin justifying his exclusion from the Promised Land. But rather than examine those explanations, I want to take issue with the idea that whatever Moses's sin was at the waters of Meribah, that is the moment when he exited the stage of Jewish history. To the contrary, it is precisely because Moses persevered in the face of divine rejection that we can understand the extraordinary nature of his leadership.

After the sin at Meribah, God pronounces his punishment: "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" (Num. 20:12). What is Moses's reaction to this harshest of sanctions? Does he sulk or walk away from his mission? Does he really exit the stage of Jewish history?

The answer is given immediately after the punishment is pronounced: "From Kadesh, Moses sent messengers to the king of Edom" (20:14). In other words, Moses continued to provide leadership to his people in the face of what was certainly an almost unbearable rejection by God. The Midrash comments on this juxtaposition:

"And Moses sent messengers." . . . In the usual way, when a man is slighted by his business partner, he wishes to have nothing more to do with him; whereas Moses, though he was punished on account of Israel, as it is stated: "They angered him at the waters of Meribah, and it went ill with Moses because of them," did not rid himself of their burden but "sent messengers." (Bemidbar Rabbah, 19:7)

We all face personal and professional setbacks in life, some of which are quite profound. When I worked for another organization a few years ago, a junior manager came to talk with me about a promotion which she believed she had been in line for but which had gone to someone else. Although the individual who had been promoted was unquestionably qualified and widely considered to be a "superstar," the junior manager was discouraged and demoralized. I suggested that she had two viable choices: walk away and find another job or stay and prove to her superiors through her continued work that she should get the next promotion. She decided to stay, put her head down, and work with renewed energy and creativity. After a few months, she was promoted. When I left the organization a few years later, she said that the advice I had given her had saved her career.

Moses did not walk away. Denied the one thing he wanted more than anything else—to lead his people into the Promised Land—he went right back to work, providing leadership through treacherous times to bring the Children of Israel safely to the border of the Land of Israel. Perseverance in the face of adversity and utter disappointment was the hallmark of Moses's leadership. It remains a model for our times as well.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z"l) and Harold Hassenfeld (z"l).

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



My Brother's [and Sister's] Keeper:
The Enduring Effect of Sibling Bonds, Sibling
Love, and Sibling Death

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The literature on sibling relationships shows that during middle age and old age, indicators of well-being—mood, health, morale, stress, depression, loneliness, life satisfaction—