

persistent complaining. Water does indeed spring forth, but God responds by barring the two brothers from ever entering the Promised Land.

When Moses loses his cool, he calls the Israelites *morim*, rebels. A Freudian analysis might say that Moses is projecting, for it is actually he who is disobeying orders. But there is a deeper Freudian slip in Moses's slip-up: the word *morim* is spelled *mem-reish-yud-mem*, just like Miriam's name.

This outburst is not a simple loss of temper but a cry for help. It is a surge of anger that betrays deep pain—a flare of irrationality that subconsciously signals truth. It may sound like the haughty contemptuousness of a leader looking down on the rabble, but it may rather be an instinctively revealed sign that Moses is just like the rest of us and does not wish to be separate from or above the community.

Moses's involuntary invocation of his sister's name suggests a desire to share his pain—an appeal for empathy from the people, adding his bereavement to the collective angst. Indeed, this yearning for solidarity is on full display when—considering another reading of the word *morim*—the consummate teacher calls his people *teachers*.

Thus, for acting (out) like the people, Moses is consigned to die with his generation in the wilderness—a punishment that carries some consolation, for an unmarked burial outside the Promised Land precludes the deification of a tomb pilgrimage cult. Even in his raw psychology, Moses is an exemplar of humility and humanity.

Hukat 5779

חוקת תשע"ט



Handling Our Anger

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Among the many stories in Parashat Hukat, perhaps the most discussed is when Moses, in response to the Israelites' grievances, is instructed by God to "order the rock to yield its water." Moses, instead, strikes the rock twice with his rod. Water comes forth, but God rebukes Moses for disobeying his instructions: "Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm my sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, there you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them" (Num. 20:2–13).

Commentators have offered a number of reasons for Moses's behavior and his ensuing punishment. What was Moses's wrongdoing? What was so egregious, and was Moses's punishment warranted? While Rashi's explanation—that Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it—is often cited, others suggest alternative readings. Rambam suggests that it wasn't Moses's *actions*, but rather his *anger* that led to God's rebuke. After Moses and Aaron assembled the *kahal*, the congregation, in front of the rock, Moses said, "Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?" (v. 10). His name-calling of the Israelites—"you rebels"—does not befit a leader of Moses's stature. It was for this reason that he was punished (*Shemonah Perakim*, Ch. 4).

Rambam, here, not only notes the power of language to uplift or destroy, but also the significance of the intention and feeling underlying our words. And yet, there is something unsettling about Rambam's explanation. Haven't we all "been there?" Certainly, there have been times when we have misspoken in a moment of frustration. We knew better, and yet, like Moses, we missed the mark. Understanding that "this happens" doesn't

justify the action, but surely it humanizes the Biblical story and relays a more relatable portrait of our greatest leader. God's reaction, though, is unequivocal: yes, we can feel anger, and we can get frustrated, but *acting* in anger and frustration is never okay.

Psychologist Dr. Laura Markham speaks directly to these issues as they relate to parenting, but her insights extend to all human interactions: "When we're swept with anger, we're physically ready to fight. It's impossible to stay calm at those points," she explains. "You'll feel an urgent need to act . . . but that's your anger talking. It thinks it's an emergency. It almost never is, though. You can teach your child later, and it will be the lesson you actually want to teach . . . Your child will certainly see you angry from time to time, and how you handle those situations teaches children a lot." We can model that "anger is part of being human, and that learning to manage anger is part of becoming mature." Markham acknowledges that this is tough work and that it's constant. "Anger, like other feelings, is as much a given as our arms and legs," she explains. Still, she contends, "what we're responsible for is what we choose to do with it" ("How to Handle Your Anger at Your Child," *Psychology Today* website).

More than just learning to take responsibility for our reactions, Markham goes further. She suggests that anger can also be instructive. It "often has a valuable lesson for us," she argues. "The constructive way to handle anger is to limit our expression of it, and when we calm down, to use it diagnostically: What is so wrong in our life that we feel furious, and what do we need to do to change the situation?" There is a lot of potential for self-discovery when we can step back and assess a situation from a less-charged, more objective place.

An additional point: Nothing productive can result when individuals' basic needs are not being met. As any parent of young children can attest, it is impossible to make headway with a hungry or tired child. No matter how calm or understanding or patient you are, if your child needs a snack, is overtired, or missed their nap, all bets, more or less, are off. The same is true if a child feels ignored, unappreciated, or overlooked. Unless our base physical and emotional needs are attended to and acknowledged, there is little chance of success.

Returning to Rambam's commentary: Markham's framing can offer additional nuance to our understanding of Moses's behavior and punishment. Moses acted in anger, and however justified he felt his fury was, nothing positive emerges from behavior that is motivated by anger and frustration. Moses failed to act responsibly, and in his position, he had an obligation to rise above and model a more mature response.

Furthermore, while directed at the Israelites, Moses's anger may reveal something different and deeper. Moses's sister, Miriam, died in the verse immediately preceding our scene. Perhaps he was grieving, incapable of both managing his own loss and successfully and compassionately leading the Israelites in this next stage of their collective journey. Or perhaps his anger was in response to something else entirely. Either way, how might a more Markham-esque perspective have helped Moses in this moment? What could Moses have learned from his emotional response, and how might that insight have better informed his choices? Finally, the Israelites were traveling in the desert, and they were thirsty. They were fair and correct in their request for water. Whiney, perhaps, but they were not unreasonable. Moses was not going to get anywhere with the Israelites until their physical need was met. Until then, there was little possibility of any effective exchange.

So, then, how might we apply these lessons in our own lives? Where are the opportunities? In what ways can our understanding of Moses's response help us better navigate, manage, and investigate our own emotions?

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).

929 Numbers Chapter 20

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929, the number of chapters in Tanakh, is the name of a project dedicated to creating a global Jewish conversation around the 929 chapters of the Hebrew Bible. Below is a contribution about this week's parashah. Visit 929.org.il to learn more.

When Miriam dies in our chapter's first verse, and the Israelites are left without water, their thirst inspires recalcitrance. God instructs Miriam's brothers, Moses and Aaron, to speak to a rock in order to procure water, and Moses strikes the rock instead, while excoriating the people for their