

Heroes and Humans

Dr. Amy Kalmanofsky, Dean of Albert A. List College of Jewish Studies and The Gershon Kekst Graduate School; Blanche and Romie Shapiro Professor of Bible, JTS



One of the things I love most about the Bible is that it presents humans, not heroes. Even the Bible's greatest figures have virtues and vices.

Moses has many wonderful attributes that qualify him to lead the Israelites. He fights against injustice ([Exod. 2:11-12](#)) and overcomes his own limitations and fears to challenge authority ([Exod. 4:10](#)). He is persistent, facing Pharaoh ten times to demand Israel's liberation. He is also a careful arbiter for his people ([Exod. 18:13-16](#)). And he is humble ([Num. 12.3](#)).

But Moses also has shortcomings. His initial reluctance when God first approaches him to become Israel's liberator could indicate cowardice, or worse, a lack of faith ([Exod. 4:11-12](#)). Moses also has a temper. He gets angry at the people ([Exod. 32:19](#)) and at God ([Num. 11:10-15](#)).

His anger gets the better of him in this week's parashah when, frustrated yet again by the complaining people, Moses strikes a rock twice instead of commanding it to produce water as God directed him, and yells at his recalcitrant people ([Num. 20:6-11](#)).

Given the great things Moses accomplishes and the intimate relationship he has with God, one expects God to forgive him this tantrum. Instead, God punishes Moses along with his brother Aaron and denies them entrance into the land of Israel.

Generations of readers question how the punishment fits the crime and search for more serious wrongdoing. After all, a moment of anger should not cancel a life's work. Moses must be guilty of more.

Rashi suggests that by striking the rock, Moses showcased his own power; he failed to sanctify God before the people by not demonstrating how an inanimate rock would respond to God's command. Similarly, Ramban suggests that Moses expressed doubt in God's power by asking the Israelites: "Shall we get water for you out of this rock?" Moses should have stated affirmatively "We will get water for you," or better yet, "God will get water for you."

Like these rabbis, I believe that Moses is held accountable for more than his anger and his ego. In my reading, God holds Moses accountable for not instilling the people with faith, as God states explicitly in verse 12: "You did not make them believe in me" [לֹא הֶאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי]. This is a serious wrong—enough to prevent Israel's great liberator from entering the land.

At this point in the Torah's story, it has been a long time since Israel stood at the banks of the Reed Sea and declared their faith in God and Moses ([Exod. 14:31](#)). Since then, Israel's faith has faltered time and again. Wandering through the desert, the people expressed their preference for slavery over starvation ([Exod. 16.3](#); [Num. 11:5](#)) and Egypt over Israel ([Num. 14.3](#)). They worshipped a cow made from earrings ([Exod. 32](#)) and rebelled against God's and Moses's authority ([Num. 16:1-11](#)).

Certainly, God holds Israel accountable for its lack of faith [[Deut. 1:32](#)] and condemns this first generation to death in the desert outside of the land of Israel ([Deut. 1:35](#)). I suggest that God also holds Moses accountable for Israel's faithlessness and condemns him to a similar fate. In my view, Israel's persistent doubt and denial is a failure of Moses's leadership.

For many, holding Moses accountable for Israel's failures seems unfair. It certainly is sad, if not tragic. But it also offers a profound lesson in leadership, particularly religious leadership.

Leaders cannot stand apart from their communities. Communities choose leaders that reflect who they are and the values they hold. Leaders are best able to guide and transform communities they are aligned with and are a part of. Leaders shape their communities, but communities also shape their leaders.

Given the symbiotic relationship between leaders and their communities, it makes sense that leaders be measured by their impact on their communities. Religious leaders in particular should be measured by their ability to create holy communities that are bound by shared values that transcend human experience. Religious leaders should inspire their communities to look beyond themselves to have faith in a greater power and a stronger moral force.

Moses certainly had faith in God, but he could not translate that faith to the desert generation. He could not make this generation believe that God would lead the people from slavery to freedom, from the desert to the promised land. Moses failed to transform Israel's first generation into a holy nation [גוי קדוש]. Instead, as Moses declares before striking the rock in anger, frustration, and resignation, they remained a community of rebels [מרים].

Heroes are people we admire. Humans are people to whom we can relate and from whom we can learn. Moses successfully lays the groundwork for a holy community defined by transcendent values that continues to flourish. For this, he becomes the hero of the Jewish people. But Moses also was very human, and his humanness is as profound and as powerful as his heroism.

This commentary originally appeared in 2021.