



The Humanity of Moses

Dr. Arnold Eisen, Chancellor Emeritus and Professor of Jewish Thought, JTS

Moses is so very human in this week's portion. He loses his sister to death at the start of chapter 20, and his brother at the end of that same chapter. In between, he is told by God that he will not live to see the fulfillment of his life's work (guiding his people into the Promised Land) either—because, being human rather than perfect, he does not follow God's instructions precisely enough when performing a miracle that elicits water from a rock. Readers of the Torah suspect that, by this point in his long life, Moses does not much care for the work he does so selflessly. He seems worn down by the incessant kvetching of his people and has long since grown used to the inscrutability of the God he loves and serves. We are drawn to this man. We want to know him and learn from him. In this way as in so many others, he accomplishes the Torah's wishes, if not God's. He draws us into the story and makes us proud to be its heirs.

But what exactly is the problem with his behavior at that water-giving rock? I find myself coming back again and again to this arresting and perplexing piece of the narrative, and an excursus in Jacob Milgrom's magnificent *The JPS Commentary: Numbers* makes it clear that a long line of readers have done so before me. "Down through the ages, the sin of Moses, as described in [Numbers 20:1–13](#), has been regarded as one of the Gordian knots of the Bible: The punishment is clear, but what is the crime?" (448). Milgrom orders 10 major interpretations given over the centuries for why Moses is punished into three categories:

Moses *strikes* the rock rather than speaking to it; he exhibits *character traits* in doing so that are unworthy of his office; the *nature of the words* that he uttered is unbecoming. I believe he is punished for all three offenses. Moses's crime is deviating publicly from God's command; letting frustration get the better of his speech; and, in so doing, showing himself to be "human, all too human" rather than the exemplar of virtue God needs him to be at that moment, as at every moment. God's punishment is harsh, but it was also

fitting. Moses no longer has what it takes to lead his extremely human people in extremely trying circumstances. Someone else will do the job.

Consider these facts of the narrative. The Israelites, having just buried Miriam, "joined against Moses and Aaron" yet again. They have apparently not learned much from the dire consequences of previous rebellions, or they are beyond caring about those consequences. They have not given up the habit of wishing they had died in Egypt rather than in the wilderness. No grain, no figs, no vines, or pomegranates. "There is not even water to drink!" (20:2–5). Moses's people are stuck in a servile pattern that began the minute they left Egypt: encounter a problem, complain to Moses, have Moses bring the problem to God, wait for God to solve it—until the next time, when the pattern repeats.

Moses and Aaron know this, but even after the awful events of the Korah rebellion they seem powerless to do anything about it. So does God. This time, when the people complain and Moses and Aaron fall on their faces before God, they are told as before to take the rod with which divine wonders have been performed since the plagues, assemble the community to witness yet another miracle, and "speak to [or at] the rock" that it may yield the needed water. The two brothers take the rod as they are told and assemble the congregation as they are told—but then Moses strays from his orders in two fascinating (and utterly human) ways.

First, he says to the people tauntingly, "Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?" (The unusual Hebrew word used for rebels, *morim*, is spelled with exactly the same letters as the name of Moses's sister, *Miryam*.) Second, Moses does not merely speak to [or at] the rock, but strikes it, not once but twice. God is not pleased. "Because you did not trust Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore you shall not lead this

congregation into the land that I have given them.” The next verse states that God “affirmed His sanctity” or “was sanctified” at/through/in these “Waters of Quarreling”—though precisely how, we are not told.

Shouldn't Moses know better? One notes in his defense that at an earlier point in the Israelites' journey ([Exod. 17:6](#)), God responded to a similar uprising occasioned by lack of water with an order to get water from a rock by striking it with the rod. What is the point of Moses bringing the rod this time, too, if not to use it as he did before? That is precisely the point, I believe. The Creator of Heaven and Earth is not bound by precedent. This is not magic but miracle: no formulaic actions or utterances are allowed. (Milgrom makes this clear in his commentary.) What is more, God's commands, when they are as specific as this one, do not allow for anything less than specific obedience from those closest to God. Moses strikes the rock without having been commanded to do so. The gesture at that moment is utterly natural—that is to say, human. The man's sister has just died, he is frustrated beyond measure by Israelite whining, and he was told the last time this situation occurred to use the rod in his hand for striking. So he does. But humanity is not a valid excuse.

The words Moses utters betray a similar straying from God's intention. God says, “You shall draw (*vehotzeta*) water from the rock for them,” with the verb in second-person singular. It is only natural that Moses should say to the people, “shall we draw (*notzi*) water?” Some commentators believe that, in doing so, he takes credit for the miracle himself rather than awarding it to God. But Moses can surely be forgiven for his phrasing, being human. He merely follows God's own grammar, in fact adjusting it to include Aaron (“we”) rather than speaking only of himself. But the commentators are onto something in their criticism. His sarcasm seems to place performance of the miracle in doubt, and Moses does omit any mention of God. Perhaps he feels that by this point in events, after God has fed the people with manna, found them water more than once, and sent more quail than they can eat—not to mention causing the ground to open miraculously and swallow up the leaders of Korah's rebellion, and—oh yes—the minor matter of splitting the Red Sea and

drowning Pharaoh's army—after all that, perhaps it might not be necessary to explain that God is saving Israel yet again and that he is only the intermediary.

But God's standards are exacting. God does not specifically order Moses and Aaron to sanctify Him one more time by means of one more miracle, but that is in their job descriptions as prophet and priest. Had Moses spoken to the rock and the rock yielded water, Rashi writes (20:12), the people might have said: This rock does not speak or hear, yet it obeys God; we should too! Instead, God is sanctified *despite* Moses and Aaron, indeed through the very fact of their punishment.

That punishment links Moses and Aaron powerfully to their sister and their people. They too, however exalted, are mortal. They too make fatal mistakes. Aaron dies at the end of the chapter in which the story of the rock is recounted, and at the start of the next chapter the people are once again complaining—no bread, no water, “miserable food” (presumably the manna). God sends serpents to bite them, the people beg Moses to intercede, God provides a magic cure for the snakebites—and they go on. Moses is probably wondering how these people—so very human in their frailty, as even he is human, despite his strength—will possibly manage to conquer enemies on the way to the Promised Land, let alone conquer those that await them across the Jordan. We certainly wonder this, as readers. That may be why, in answer to Moses's doubt and ours, the Torah immediately tells of battles that the Israelites win. We hear of a “Book of the Wars of the Lord,” and are given snatches from collected poetry of triumph—as if to assure Moses, tired and resigned after decades in the wilderness, that the promise of the Promised Land stands. His people will get there without him.

Moses understands that he is not the leader to take them there. He is more than ready to hand over responsibility to someone else. This is the last—and perhaps the greatest—of the many lessons he teaches us about being human and trying one's best as a human being to do the will of God.

This commentary originally appeared in 2012.