Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

CHUKAT • חוקת

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF **RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS** זצ"ל

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel.
"I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah. An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

This year's series of essays were originally written and recorded by Rabbi Sacks zt"l in 5773 (2012–2013).
These timeless messages are accompanied by a new Family Edition created to inspire intergenerational learning on the Parsha.

Why Was Moses Not Destined to Enter the Land?

It is one of the most perplexing, even disturbing, passages in the Torah. Moses the faithful shepherd, who has led the Israelites for forty years, is told that he will not live to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land.

No one has cast a longer shadow over the history of the Jewish people than Moses - the man who confronted Pharaoh, announced the plagues, brought the people out of Egypt, led them through the sea and desert and suffered their serial ingratitude; who brought the Word of God to the people, and prayed for the people to God. The name Israel means "one who wrestles with God and with men and prevails." That, supremely, was Moses, the man whose passion for justice and hyper-receptivity to the voice of God made him the greatest leader of all time. Yet he was not destined to enter the land to which he had spent his entire time as a leader travelling toward. Why?

The biblical text at this point is both lucidly clear and deeply obscure. The facts are not in doubt. Almost forty years have passed since the Exodus. Most of the generation who remembered Egypt have died. So too had Miriam, Moses' sister. The people have arrived at Kadesh in the Zin desert, and they are now close to their destination. In their new encampment, however, they find themselves without water. They complain. "*Why have you brought the Lord's assembly into this wilderness only for us and our livestock to die here? Why did you take us up out of Egypt to bring us to this dreadful place with no grain, no figs, no vines or pomegranates – there is no water to drink!*" (Num. 20:4-5) The tone of voice, the petulance, is all too familiar. The Israelites have hardly deviated from it throughout. Yet suddenly we experience not *deja-vu* but tragedy:

Moshe and Aharon went away from the assembly to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.

> They fell on their faces, and the Lord's glory was revealed to them. And the Lord spoke to Moshe: *"Take the staff, you and your brother Aharon, and assemble the*

community. Speak to the rock before their eyes and it will give forth water. You shall bring forth water for them from the rock, giving the community and their animals to drink." Moshe took the staff from before the Lord, as He had commanded him. And Moshe and Aharon gathered the assembly together before the rock. He said to them, *"Listen now, rebels! Shall we produce water for you from this rock?"* Then Moshe raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their animals drank. But the Lord said to Moshe and Aharon, *"Because you did not put your trust in Me to demonstrate My holiness in the Israelites' eyes, you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I am giving them."*
(Num. 20:6-12)

Where had Moses gone wrong? What was his sin? What offence could warrant so great a punishment as not to be privileged to see the conclusion of the mission he had been set by God?

Few passages have generated so much controversy among the commentators. Each offers his own interpretation and challenges the others. So many were the hypotheses that the nineteenth century Italian exegete R. Shmuel David Luzzatto was moved to say, "Moses committed one sin, yet the commentators have accused him of thirteen or more - each inventing some new iniquity!" One modern scholar (R. Aaron Rother, Shaarei Aharon) lists no less than twenty-five lines of approach, and there are many more.

The following are the most significant: Rashi, offering the simplest and best-known explanation, says that Moses' sin lay in striking the rock rather than speaking to it. Had Moses done as he was commanded, the people would have learned an unforgettable lesson: "If a rock, which neither speaks nor hears nor is in need of sustenance, obeys the word of God, how much more so should we."

Rambam (Moses Maimonides) says that Moses' sin lay in his anger - his intemperate words to the people, "*Listen now, rebels*." To be sure, in anyone else, this would have been considered a minor offence. However, the greater the person, the more exacting are the standards God sets. Moses was not only a leader but the supreme role-model of the Israelites. Seeing his behaviour, the people may have concluded that anger is permissible - or even that God was angry with them, which He was not.

Ramban (Nachmanides), following a suggestion of Rabbeinu Chananel, says that the sin lay in saying, "*Shall we produce water for you from this rock?*" - implying that what was at issue was human ability rather than Divine miracle and grace.

R. Joseph Albo and others (including Ibn Ezra) suggest that the sin lay in the fact that Moses and Aaron fled from the congregation and fell on their faces, rather than standing their ground, confident that God would answer their prayers.

Abarbanel makes the ingenious suggestion that Moses and Aaron were not punished for what they did at this point. Rather, their offences lay in the distant past. Aaron sinned by making the Golden Calf. Moses sinned in sending the spies. Those were the reasons they were not privileged to enter the land. To defend their honour, however, their sins are not made

explicit in the biblical text. Their actions at the rock were the proximate rather than underlying cause (a hurricane may be the proximate cause of a bridge collapsing; the underlying cause, however, was a structural weakness in the bridge itself).

More recently, the late Rav Shach zt"l suggested that Moses may have been justified in rebuking the people, but he erred in the sequence of events. First he should have given them water, showing both the power and providence of God. Only then, once they had drunk, should he have admonished them.

Difficulties, however, remain. The first is that Moses himself attributed God's refusal to let him enter the land to His anger with the people, not just with himself: "*At that time, I pleaded with the Lord: 'O Lord God, You have begun to show Your servant Your greatness and Your mighty hand; what force in heaven or earth can do deeds and mighty acts like Yours! Please let me cross over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and the Lebanon.' But the Lord was enraged with me because of you, and would not listen to me*. (Deut. 3:23)

Similarly, Psalm 106:32 states, "By the waters of Merivah they angered the Lord and trouble came to Moses because of them." Second: however we identify Moses' sin, there is still a disproportion between it and its punishment. Because of Moses' prayers, God forgave the Israelites. Could He not forgive Moses? To deprive him of seeing the culmination of a lifetime's efforts was surely unduly harsh. According to the Talmud, when the angels witnessed Rabbi Akiva's death, they said, "Is this the Torah, and this its reward?" They might have asked the same question about Moses.

Third is the tantalising fact that, on a previous occasion in similar circumstances, God had specifically told Moses to take his staff and strike the rock: precisely the act for which (for Rashi and many others) he was now punished:

> But the people were thirsty for water. They railed against Moshe, *"Why did you bring us out of Egypt? Was it to kill me, my children, and all my livestock by thirst?" "What shall I do with this people?"* Moshe cried to the Lord. *"Another moment and they will stone me*." The Lord answered Moshe, *"Walk out to face the people taking some of the elders of Israel with you. Take the staff with which you struck the Nile in your hand, and go. I will be there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock; water will come out of it and the people will drink."* (Ex. 17:3-6)

It is with the deepest trepidation that one hazards a new explanation of so debated a text, but there may be a way of seeing the entire episode that ties the others together and makes sense of what otherwise seems like an impenetrable mystery.

The Talmud (Avodah Zarah 5a) contains the following statement of Resh Lakish:

> What is the meaning of the verse, 'This is the book of the generations of Adam'? Did Adam have a book? Rather, it teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, showed Adam (in advance), each generation and its interpreters, each generation and its Sages, each generation and its leaders.

One of the most striking features of Judaism is that it is not centred on a single figure - a founder - who dominates its entire history. To the contrary, each age gave rise to its own leaders, and they were different from one another, not only in personality but in the type of leadership they exercised. First came the age of the patriarchs and matriarchs. Then came Moses and his disciple Joshua. They were followed by a succession of figures known generically as 'Judges', though their role was more military than judicial. With Saul, monarchy was born - though even then, kings were not the only leaders; there were prophets and priests as well. With Ezra a new figure emerges: the 'Scribe', the teacher as hero. Then came elders, Sages, masters of halachah and aggadah. During the Mishnaic period the leader of the Jewish people was known as Nasi (and later, in Babylon, as Resh Galutah or Exilarch). Chatam Sofer in one of his Responsa (Orach Chayyim, 12) notes that though the Nasi was a scholar, his role was as much political as educational and spiritual. He was, in fact, a surrogate king. The Middle Ages saw the emergence of yet more new types: commentators, codifiers, philosophers and poets, alongside a richly varied range of leadership structures, some lay, some rabbinic, others a combination of both.

Leadership is a function of time. There is a famous dispute about Noah, whom the Torah describes as 'perfect in his generations'. According to one view, had Noah lived in a more righteous age, he would have been greater still. According to another, he would have been merely one of many. The fact is that each generation yields the leadership appropriate to it. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 21b) says that Ezra was worthy of bringing the Torah to Israel, had Moses not preceded him. In another passage (Menachot 29b) it says that Moses himself asked God to give the Torah through Rabbi Akiva rather than himself. One can speculate endlessly about the might-have-beens of history, but we are each cast into the world at a time not of our choosing, and we have no choice but to live within its particular challenges and constraints. For that reason, we do not compare leaders, for there are no timeless standards by which to judge them. "Jerubaal in his generation was like Moses in his generation; Bedan in his generation was like Aaron in his generation; Jepthah in his generation was like Samuel in his generation."

Each age produces its leaders, and each leader is a function of an age. There may be - indeed there are - certain timeless truths about leadership. A leader must have courage and integrity. He must be able, say the Sages, to relate to each individual according to his or her distinctive needs. Above all, a leader must constantly learn (a king must study the Torah "all the days of his life"). But these are necessary, not sufficient, conditions. A leader must be sensitive to the call of the hour - this hour, this generation, this chapter in the long story of a people. And because he or she is of a specific generation, even the greatest leader cannot meet the challenges of a different generation. That is not a failing. It is the existential condition of humanity.

The remarkable fact about Moses and the rock is the way he observes precedent. Almost forty years earlier, in similar circumstances, God had told him to take his staff and strike the rock. Now too, God told him to take his staff. Evidently Moses inferred that he was being told to act this time as he had before, which is what he does. He strikes the rock. What he failed to understand was that time had

changed in one essential detail. He was facing a new generation. The people he confronted the first time were those who had spent much of their lives as slaves in Egypt. Those he now faced were born in freedom in the wilderness.

There is one critical difference between slaves and free human beings. Slaves respond to orders. Free people do not. They must be educated, informed, instructed, taught - for if not, they will not learn to take responsibility. Slaves understand that a stick is used for striking. That is how slave-masters compel obedience. Indeed, that was Moses' first encounter with his people, when he saw an Egyptian beating an Israelite. But free human beings must not be struck. They respond not to power but persuasion. They need to be spoken to. What Moses failed to hear - indeed to understand - was that the difference between God's command then and now ("strike the rock" and "speak to the rock") was of the essence. The symbolism in each case was precisely calibrated to the mentalities of two different generations. You strike a slave, but *speak* to a free person.

Moses' inability to hear this distinction was not a failing, still less was it a sin. It was an inescapable consequence of the fact that he was mortal. A figure capable of leading slaves to freedom is not the same as one able to lead free human beings from a nomadic existence in the wilderness to the conquest and settlement of a land. These are different challenges, and they need different types of leadership. Indeed the whole biblical story of how a short journey took forty years teaches us just this truth. Great change does not take place overnight. It takes more than one generation - and therefore more than one type of leader. Moses could not become a Joshua, just as Joshua could not be another Moses. The fact that at a moment of crisis Moses reverted to an act that had been appropriate forty years before showed that time had come for the leadership to be handed on to a new generation. It is a sign of his greatness that Moses, too, recognised this fact and took the initiative in asking God (in Bamidbar ch. 27) to appoint a successor.

If this interpretation is correct, then Moses did not sin, nor was he punished. To be sure, the Torah uses language expressive of sin ("You did not believe in Me", "You rebelled against Me", "You trespassed against Me", "You did not sanctify Me"). But these phrases may refer, as several commentators suggest (see the tenth interpretation cited by Abarbanel, and the commentary of Luzzatto) not to Moses and Aaron but to the people, and the incident as a whole. That would explain why Moses said that "God was angry with me because of you".

The fact that Moses was not destined to enter the Promised Land was not a punishment but the very condition of his (and our) mortality. It is also clear why this episode occurs in the sedra of Chukat, which begins with the rite of the Red Heifer and purification from contact with death. We also understand why it follows the death of Miriam, Moses and Aaron's sister. Law and narrative are here intricately interwoven in a set of variations on the inevitability of death and the continuity of life. For each of us, there is a Jordan we will not cross, however long we live, however far we travel. "It is not for you to complete the task," said Rabbi Tarfon, "but neither are you free to disengage from it." But this is not inherently tragic. What we begin, others will complete - if we have taught them how.

Moses was a great leader, the greatest of all time. But he was also the supreme teacher. The difference is that his leadership lasted for forty years, while his teachings have endured for more than three thousand years (that, incidentally, is why we call him *Moshe Rabbeinu,* "Moses our teacher", not "Moses our leader"). This is not to devalue leadership: to the contrary. Had Moses only taught, not led, the Israelites would not have left Egypt. The message of the rock is not that leadership does not matter: it is that leadership must be of its time. A teacher may live in the world of ancient texts and distant hopes, but a leader must hear the music of the age and address the needs and possibilities of now.

The great leaders are those who, knowledgeable of a people's past and dedicated to its ideal future, are able to bring their contemporaries with them on the long journey from exile to redemption, neither longing for an age that was, nor rushing precipitously into an age that cannot yet be. And, as Moses understood more deeply than any other human being, the great leaders are also teachers, empowering those who come after them to continue what they have begun.

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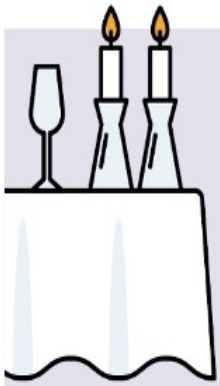

Around the Shabbat Table

1. Moshe made a human error in judgment. Does that make him less impressive to you?
2. Consider other leaders from the stories in the Tanach. Which of them had moments that made them seem more human? What did that say about their leadership?
3. Can you be a truly great leader without also being humble?

- These questions come from this week's **Family Edition** to Rabbi Sacks' Covenant & Conversation. For an interactive, multi-generational study, check out the full edition at https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/chukat/why-was-moses-not-destined-to-enter-the-