



Have a Little Faith • Parshat Hukat-Balak

One of the most debilitating and consequential moments in Moses' leadership occurs in this week's Torah reading, *Hukat-Balak*. It begins with the death of Moses' sister, Miriam and ends with the death of his brother, Aaron. In between these tragic losses, Moses struck a rock with his staff instead of speaking to it and strangely lost the right to enter the land of Israel. The loss of family and role in such a condensed time period could have shattered Moses' will to bring the people to the edge of the Jordan River. Nevertheless, he persisted. What gave him strength?

Let's turn to the first few verses of our parsha: "The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there. The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron" (Num. 20:1-2). We are given no reason for Miriam's death. It is almost recorded as a passing fact of wilderness life. The people moved. A leader died. The people complained about water.

One midrash strings these events together. If water disappeared when Miriam died, it must have been in her merit that water was given to the Israelites in the form of a magical well throughout their travels. This midrash is so familiar that it can distract readers from realizing the actual ignominy of her death. The people, so tired and faithless by

this point, said nothing to Moses and Aaron about their loss. They allowed their leaders no personal time to mourn. They thought only of their own needs and pounced on Moses and Aaron with complaints: "Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!" (Num. 20:5).

As a result, Miriam's death was ignored by those she served. It was she who protected their savior, standing by the reeds when Moses was placed in the Nile. It was she who fetched her mother as a nursemaid for Moses, keeping him connected to his family. It was she who celebrated with joy and timbrels when her brother split the sea for the Israelites to cross to safety. But all of these memories were suddenly erased.

Instead of mourning, the brothers fell on their faces before God and awaited instruction: "You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus, you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts" (Nu. 20:8). The Israelites weren't censured. They would get what they wanted. In fact, copious amounts of water poured from the stone, making this one of the most dramatic miracles of desert life.

The Israelites got the water they were desperate for but not exactly the way they wanted it: “Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them, ‘Listen, *you rebels*, shall we get water for you out of this rock?’” (Num. 20:10). Moses, perhaps stabbed with a grief unacknowledged and lacking patience for more grumbling, did not merely speak to the rock. He did not only hit the rock with his rod. He called the people – his people – rebels (*hamorim*).

Rashi explains the word as “foolish people.” Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra similarly writes that their request was farfetched, prompting Moses and Aaron to reply: “Do we have the power to bring forth water out of this rock for you?” Nahmanides elaborates on ibn Ezra’s position: “He [Moses] thus stressed their rebellion, telling them they were wanting in faith, and that the reason for their quarrelling with him was because they thought that God would not act wondrously for them.” It is as if, after all of the signs and wonders that the Israelites relished, they still doubted God’s salvific powers. This, Moses could not tolerate.

But Moses did not get the last word in the chapter. God was angry with Moses and Aaron and forbade them from entering the land: “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). Rashi here is unequivocal: “For had you spoken to the rock, and it had brought forth water, I would have been sanctified before the whole congregation, for they would have said: This rock, which cannot speak and cannot hear and needs no maintenance, fulfils the bidding of the Omnipresent God. How much more should we do so?” If a rock can bring forth water, then we, too, have the capacity to follow the will of our Maker.

Moses, out of anger, hit the rock, but God ultimately punished him because he lost faith in the people he was leading. Once you stop believing in your people, you lose the privilege of leading them. “If you want to be a leader,” writes Bruce Kananoff in “Leadership in One Word: Faith” (*Forbes*, July 23, 2015), “your focus needs to be on earning the faith of people around you.” Faith in a leader generates faith in the mission and faith in all those engaged in the mission. The more faith you have, the more belief people will have that they can stretch themselves to do what they never thought possible. “People,” Kananoff states, “want great leaders to succeed. They want to have faith that if the leader succeeds, they, too, will succeed.” This was not only true for our faith in God, Moses, or Aaron. In “The Leader’s Call to Responsibility,” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains that, “The deepest mystery of all is not our faith in God but God’s faith in us. May that faith sustain us as we heed the call to responsibility and take the risk of healing some of the needless wounds of an injured but still wondrous world.”

Why did Moses continue, alone and bereft as he was? Because, through the rock incident, God held up a mirror to Moses’ faith to show him the still ‘wondrous world’ after he thought he lost everything. Water can gush out of stone just as slaves can be set free. Just as a people can return home after centuries of exile. Have faith in Me, said God with this water. Have faith in the mission. Have faith in yourself. And, above all, have faith in your people, even when they cannot see your pain or honor your loss. They are still your people. They need you to have faith in them.

Describe a time to you had enough faith to carry out a mission even when it felt impossibly hard.