Moses' Big Mistake

James Kugel

The Bible recounts that, toward the end of their forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites ran out of water. They of course complained bitterly to their leaders, Moses and Aaron: "Why did you take us out of Egypt only to have us die here of thirst?" Thereupon, God instructed Moses to pick up his staff and go with Aaron to a certain rock. "Speak to the rock," God tells them, "so that it gives forth water, and there will be enough to drink for all the Israelites and their flocks." The two then proceed to carry out this instruction:

> Moses took the staff from before the Lord as He had commanded him. Then Moses and Aaron gathered the people in front of the rock, and he said to them: "Hear me now, you rebellious ones: can we get water for you from out of this rock?" Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff, and abundant water flowed from the rock, so that the congregation and their flocks could drink. Then the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Since you did not show your trust in Me, sanctifying Me in the Israelites' sight, you will not lead this congregation to the land that I am giving them." (Numbers 20:9-12)

The last sentence comes as a shock. Didn't Moses and Aaron do exactly as they were told? Then why should they now be prevented from finishing their mission of leading the Israelites into the Promised Land?

This passage has posed something of a challenge to biblical interpreters. Some have suggested that Moses had erred in *striking* the rock. After all, God had told Moses to *speak* to the rock, but He didn't say anything about Moses hitting it with his staff. But this explanation seems unlikely on two counts. First, and most important, this wasn't the first time that Moses was told to produce water from a rock. The same thing had happened years earlier, at the very start of the Israelites' wanderings in the wilderness. On that occasion, too, there was not enough water for the people to drink; then as well, the people quarreled with Moses, and God instructed Moses to go to a certain rock with his staff.

> [God said:] "I will be present there, next to the rock at Horeb, and you will *strike the rock* with your staff and water will come out of it

> for the people to drink." And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. (Exod 17:6)

Here there was apparently no problem with striking the rock: it gave up its water and God said nothing to Moses in the way of a reproach. So if there was no problem the first time, what was wrong the second time?

Those who blame Moses for striking the rock instead of talking to it have another problem as well. In the incident with which we began, no less than in the one just cited, God orders Moses to *take his staff*. What would be the point of such an order if all that Moses had to do was speak to the rock? What is more, the Hebrew word for "speak" (here *dibbartem*) seems to be connected to the same root that appears elsewhere as a verb meaning "strike" or "smash." True, in the latter sense it is usually in the *hiph'il* ("causative") form, but some scholars have suggested that *dibbartem* here may simply be an alternative to that form with the same meaning—that is, "strike." After all, what sense does it make for Moses to speak to a rock? At least hitting it is an action that might conceivably open some crevice through which water could then flow, perhaps from an underground stream beneath it. What would talking accomplish?

Considering such evidence, other commentators have ventured that Moses' big mistake was striking the rock *twice*. After all, God had said nothing about striking it two times; if Moses had deviated from his instructions even in this one detail, wouldn't that be enough to merit punishment? But this, too, seems unlikely. God's instructions did not specify that Moses strike the rock any specific number of times; He certainly didn't say "once and no more." Even if Moses had struck it ten or twenty times, could that really be construed as disobeying God's order?

Actually, I've never understood why this passage should seem so mysterious to commentators.[1] The Bible states the reason for Moses' and Aaron's subsequent punishment quite clearly: "Since you did not show your trust in Me,[2] sanctifying Me in the Israelites' sight, you will not lead

---

[1] Jacob Milgrom has conveniently surveyed various approaches to Moses' sin among ancient and medieval Jewish commentators in his popular *Numbers: the JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 448-56. See further his "Magic, Monotheism, and the Sin of Moses," in H. B. Huffmon et al. *The Quest for the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 251-61. Among recent approaches, see W. H. Propp, "The Rod of Aaron and the Sin of Moses", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107 (1988), 19-26; John Beck, "Why Did Moses Strike Out? The Narrative-Geographical Shaping of Moses' Disqualification in Numbers 20:1-13", *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (2003), 135-49; N. Helfgot, "And Moses Struck the Rock: Numbers 20 and the Leadership of Moses" *Tradition* 27:3 (1993), 51-58; M. Lichtenshtein, *Moses: Envoy of God, Envoy of His People: Leadership and Crisis from the Exodus to the Plains of Moab*, (New York: KTAV, 2008), 181-194.

□ to mean either "understand" and "cause [others] to understand," (Brown-Driver-Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 107.

this congregation to the land that I am giving them." What does this mean in context? It means that Moses should never have said what he said to the people: "Hear me now, you rebellious ones: *can we get water* for you from out of this rock?" The problem was the "can *we* get water." Through this little slip of the tongue, it seemed as if Moses and Aaron were actually taking credit for a miracle that God was about to perform and thereby not "sanctifying Me in the Israelites' sight."

The slip is somewhat understandable. After all, faced with the same situation some years earlier, Moses had been ordered by God to strike the rock and everything turned out fine. Moses was silent that first time; perhaps it was hard for him to believe that striking a rock would produce anything. But now, God gives Moses what looks like the same order, and Moses—having no reason to fear that the outcome will be any different this time—confidently uses the occasion to reprove the Israelites for their lack of faith: "Hear me now, you rebellious ones: can we get water for you from out of this rock?" (Some Bible translations render God's subsequent rebuke of Moses as: "Since you did not trust in Me" or "Because you did not trust Me enough," but neither of these makes sense. Moses had plenty of trust that everything would turn out well; that's why he could give his swaggering challenge to the people, "Can we get water for you from out of this rock?" Rather, it was precisely his overconfidence that led him to omit a crucial step, namely, publicly *declaring his reliance* on God and thereby "sanctifying Me in the Israelites' sight.")

#

So Moses shouldn't have done that. But was that really a reason to curtail the sacred mission to which he had dedicated such a great part of his life? For forty years, he and his brother had wandered the arid wildernesses to the south and east of their future homeland, waiting for the time when God would finally tell them to lead the Israelites across the Jordan into the fruitful territory promised to their ancestors. Now, just when the promise was about to be fulfilled, everything collapses because of one unfortunate turn of phrase! Where is divine mercy?

But in the world of ancient Israel, taking credit for God's doings was not a minor slipup. It contradicted the whole starting point of biblical religion—I should say, of any theistic religion. That starting point was the belief that the gods (and eventually, for Israel, God) are great and we are small. The gods/God controlled all that we did not—and that was quite a lot. So when Rachel, frustrated at her infertility, says to her husband, "Give me children or else I'll die," Jacob reasonably answers, "Am I in God's stead?" It is important that he didn't merely say, "What can I do?" or something similar. His answer is more specific and more

pointed, highlighting what anyone in the biblical world knew in any case, namely, that the stopped-up womb was something that only God could fix. Because, of course, anything humans can do they don't need God for; but in the biblical world, what humans controlled was only a small part of existence. The whole, vast, physical space that extended from biblical man's fingertips to highest heaven was not empty but belonged to, and was ruled by, forces divine. As a result, turning to God was always an act of acknowledgement of human limitations, indeed, an act of utter surrender. It said, "Okay, *You* help me; I am powerless in this."

#

Birnbaum, a smalltime lawyer in his mid-fifties, was a Jew of rather ordinary piety. A bit too sluggish to rise early each morning in order to pray in the synagogue, he nevertheless did recite the prayers at home after he eventually got out of bed. This would take about twenty or twenty-five minutes. Sometimes he would go to synagogue for afternoon and evening prayers, but sometimes not; if not, he would pray at home. This is the way it had been since he was a child. As for the other commandments, he was ordinarily scrupulous. Kosher food, for him, was food that had a kosher certificate; he would never consider eating anything that was not kosher, but neither did he limit himself to food that had the blessing of a particular Hasidic sect, as some of the so-called ultra-Orthodox did. He observed the laws of the sabbath like everyone else, and saw to it that his children had a good Jewish education. Lately, he had begun to suffer the little back aches and muscle pains that are the first harbingers of the human time-clock's advancing hour, but none of these was sufficient to merit a trip to the doctor. Ordinary pain killers were all an ordinary Jew required.

One day – on a whim, and for no conscious reason that occurred to him – Birnbaum changed his morning prayer routine slightly. Normally, he would rush through the reading of the psalms that preceded the recitation of the *Shema* and its blessings. This time, too, he rushed through them, until he got to Psalm 147. Then, for some unfathomable reason, he began to recite its words carefully, word-for-word, with deliberation. Now, Psalm 147 is not a terribly long psalm, but neither is it short, and this new deliberation cost him perhaps twenty or thirty seconds. Reaching the end, he realized he had been dawdling and resumed his natural pace.

The day proceeded as usual, and it was only sometime in mid-afternoon that he realized that his back pain was gone. Simply disappeared! He did not immediately make the connection with Psalm 147, but that night it occurred to him that his slowed-down, deliberate recital might have some connection with his sudden freedom from pain.

After all, the psalm contained the line, *He who heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds*, and he remembered thinking about his own aches as he read it that morning.

The next morning, he forswore his usual pain-killer and eagerly began his prayers; when he came to Psalm 147, he read it in the same deliberate, emphatic way that he had read it the day before. Sure enough, he was pain-free for the entire day. The thought then occurred to him that he may have been missing other benefits by rushing through the daily psalms. He resolved to adopt the same deliberate, slow pace for all of them. On the following day, therefore, his prayers took perhaps five or ten minutes more than usual – but it was worth it! He paused in particular at the verse in the preceding psalm, Psalm 146, that reads: "He brings justice to those who are oppressed." This caught his eye because he was just then in the midst of a grievance proceeding for one of his clients, Schwartz, a man who had been fired without cause from his job. Somehow, Schwartz had popped into his mind as he was reciting the verse, and he wondered if its deliberate recitation might have some effect. Nothing happened that day, but on the day following, he received a phone call from the legal counsel of Schwartz's company informing him that they were dropping their opposition to Schwartz's claim for damages; he would be given his old job back along with full compensation for back pay. Birnbaum was exultant.

Now he set out to say all his prayers in earnest. Each morning he eagerly put on his *tefillin* and began a slow, methodical recitation, scrutinizing each verse for its possible implications. *The Lord sets prisoners free...* he read, and decided on the spot to take on the next criminal appeals case that came his way. It did not happen all at once, but when someone – actually, a vague acquaintance from his youth who, Birnbaum remembered reading, had recently been imprisoned for tax fraud – wrote to him in a desperate plea for help, Birnbaum responded with enthusiasm, even though he would likely never recover a fee from the man. Reading *He gives food to the hungry...*, Birnbaum turned his thoughts to the soup kitchen in which his wife volunteered twice a week – it really deserved greater financial support. *Who covers the heavens with clouds, providing rainfall for the earth* brought to mind the ongoing drought in Sudan and Somalia that he had recently read about; reciting the verse with great concentration, Birnbaum directed his thoughts upward, accompanied by piteous mental images of desiccated farmlands and a shrinking water table. Sure enough, in all these cases, Birnbaum's psalm recitations were – to his unending astonishment – crowned with success. In fact, there was not a verse that he read in his new state of deliberation that did not, he came to realize, yield some positive good somewhere.

It only slowly dawned on Birnbaum what a great responsibility was now his. If it happened thus with the psalms that preceded the bulk of morning prayers, ought he not as well to read the rest of the service with similar concentration – the blessings before and after the *Shema,* the requests contained in the Eighteen Benedictions, the penitential prayers that followed, and then more psalms and more supplications, all the way to the last line of *It is incumbent upon us*? Now there was no question of his joining the other congregants for morning prayers in the synagogue; they went at far too fast a pace for him to include all he had to pray for. At *Heal us, O Lord, and we shall be healed* in the Eighteen Benedictions, Birnbaum inserted a long list of all those he knew to be ailing. At first this list consisted of people he knew personally – his wife's cousin Steve, friends from work or from the neighborhood. But eventually – for how could he stint, given his astounding success rate? – Birnbaum took to scouring the headlines and including the names of politicians and aging movie stars and other public figures who had fallen ill. It apparently did not matter that he did not refer to them by their Hebrew name or the Hebrew name of their mothers, as was customary in pleas for divine healing; a great many of them were not Jewish in any case. So he would simply say, "Mayor So-and-so of San Diego," "Mike O'Connor, the teller at the bank," and healing would follow forthwith. *Bless this harvest-year for us...,* the next of the Eighteen Benedictions, covered anyone in material want – not just individuals, but whole populations. Here too, Birnbaum relied on news reports, both those in the papers and on the television news, taking careful notes throughout the broadcast of the latter (arousing his wife's mild curiosity).

Soon, Birnbaum found that even if he rose early and began his deliberate recitation by 6:30 in the morning, it would still take him until well past 11:00 before he could finish. The short winter days allowed him only a quick break for lunch and a brief hunt for additional names of those in need before he would have to start the afternoon prayers, and when they were finished he would almost immediately proceed to the evening prayer, only to collapse in an exhausted heap before dinner and then, for a few hours, blessed sleep.

The results of his exertions were not hard to see: in the headlines, on the television news, it was clear that the world was becoming – everywhere, and in every way – a kinder, friendlier place for humans of all races and creeds. Commentator commented, pundits speculated, forecasters wondered when it would all end; only Birnbaum knew the truth. He remained unstinting in his efforts, indeed, he sought to reach ever higher: surely there was more that he could be doing to bring goodness into the world. *You have loved us with everlasting love* he recited, pausing on each word in the sure knowledge that God would hear

him and do so; *compassion abundant to excess You have showered upon us*.

After a time, he realized that he had exhausted all of the prayers themselves: there was not a word, not a syllable, that he did not exploit to the fullest, day in and day out. Still, he knew in his heart that there was more to be done. He could, and soon did, recite additional psalms not included in the standard prayers – as many as time would permit. But even that did not exhaust all possibilities. How, for example, was he to return the *tefillin* to their little bag? Surely that simple act, so closely connected to the prayers themselves, could likewise be performed with deliberation. And so, morning after morning, Birnbaum rolled the leather straps into their configuration with intense concentration, thinking as he did so about the economy of Zambia or the low birth rate in Finland. The little bag's zipper, too, could no longer simply be pulled shut. *Look down from Your place, from the heavens,* Birnbaum recited by heart from Deuteronomy as he closed the zipper, mentally urging God to attend more closely to the unfortunate ones living in the suburbs of Paris and Mexico City.

The contagion spread. It was not only the act of prayer and all that surrounded it, but Birnbaum's every deed came likewise to influence the fate of the world. As a result, the whole matter of kosher food had now to be reexamined. The much lauded strictness of the ultra-Orthodox authorities seemed to him a cruel jest; their petty rulings lacked any authority that he could respect. Instead, Birnbaum moved to a strictly vegetarian diet, which was altogether beyond any suspicion of contamination. Even that, however, eventually gave way to a diet of raw greens (since any cooking process might theoretically introduce an element of doubt into Birnbaum's mind), nuts and fruits. And so he sat, silently and deliberately chewing each lima bean and flax seed with great deliberation, opposite his kind but uncomprehending wife, and all the while thinking: *You open Your hand and satisfy the wants of all the living*.

You may be wondering, dear reader, what brought Birnbaum's efforts to a close – since clearly the world has relapsed since the day that he began his deliberate morning prayers. Was he himself killed off by sheer exhaustion? Or did he, at some point, simply rebel? *You take care of Your own world, Lord – I've had it!* Or was it the world itself that, sated to excess with God's provident care, sopped in divine goodness to the point where no ill, even the smallest, remained, could finally contain no more and so, sharply accelerating its rotation at just the right moment, whirled Birnbaum off its surface and into orbit, where he, a saintly relic, circles to this day?

No, it was none of these. Rather, it was that pain in Birnbaum's back. One day it returned. Birnbaum was astounded. *He who heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds*, he intoned, not once but several times that day. Each time, however, the pain only worsened. *Bind up their wounds!* he cried angrily as he got out of bed the next morning, but winced in agony as he tried to straighten up. He recited the entire morning prayer – and especially the eighth of the Eighteen Benedictions, *Heal us, O Lord, and we shall be healed* – with such deliberation that it was nearly noon before he finished, and yet his back was no better than it had been five hours earlier. Birnbaum, now bent over in pain, sobbed and sobbed, his tears staining his trousers and besmirching his simple leather shoes. Then, in a flash, he stopped and, as if wakening from a long sleep, considered the room around him and his own reflection in the window. "Got it," was all he said.