

Moses, Perfection, and the Rest of Us

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When we roll the Torah to *Parashat Korach* each year, my mind takes me back to an adult Bat Mitzvah, decades ago, when I was a young rabbi. The Bat Mitzvah was a retired psychiatrist, Dr. Bernice Elkin, of blessed memory. The Torah portion tells of Korach's revolt against his first cousins, Moses and Aaron, exclaiming, "You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and Adonai is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourself above Adonai's congregation?"ⁱ

As she gave her *D'var Torah*, her "Bat Mitzvah speech," Dr. Elkin suggested that Korach had a point. Moses had indeed been too high and mighty. She proposed that Moses benefited from the rebellion and its critique, shaping him into the leader needed for decades of desert wandering.

Writing this week, Rabbi Jacob Chatinover agrees: "Throughout the book of [Numbers], the people voice their needs, and Moses consistently seems to react with frustration and without due empathy."ⁱⁱ For example, when the people complain about the lack of variety in their daily desert diet of manna, Moses *kvetches* to God, referring to the Israelites as "the burden" that God has "laid...upon" him.ⁱⁱⁱ Worse is Moses's reaction to the people when they suddenly have no water. God instructs Moses to speak to a rock, and water will flow. Instead, Moses screams at the people, calling them "rebels," and smashes his rod on the rock, making it look like he, not God, provides the water.^{iv} Might Moses have been more empathetic with people who fear that they may die of dehydration?

When Dr. Elkin's Bat Mitzvah service concluded on that Shabbat morning all those years ago, I was approached by a very angry couple, guests of the Bat Mitzvah whom I did not know. How dare I, they asked, permit Bernice to defame *Moshe Rabbeinu*—Moses, our sainted rabbi—in the sacred precincts of a synagogue. Moses, they told me, was entirely without fault.

I don't recall how I responded. I worried about Dr. Elkin, but she was not as bothered by her guests' outrage as I imagined. I just wanted them to leave!

I do know what I thought: Moses isn't perfect! Even God seems to agree. After Moses screams at the people and strikes the rock, God punishes him. Moses will not be permitted to lead the people into the Promised Land but will die on the far side of the Jordan.

Humans instinctively want our heroes to be pure and flawless and our villains to be thoroughly evil. Think, for example, of the way many Americans view President Trump: For many of his supporters, he can do absolutely nothing wrong. For an equal percentage of his detractors, he never does anything right. Neither is true.

God says to Abraham, "Walk before Me and be perfect."^v God does not tell our patriarch that he **is** perfect, but that he should **be** perfect—that is, Abraham's goal in serving God is to strive **toward** perfection. God's overarching commandment is, "You shall be holy, for I, Adonai your God, am holy."^{vi} Our role in this world is to perform מצוות, religious obligations, to bring God's creation closer to perfection. Only God is intrinsically holy, not Moses nor any of the rest of us. Moses had work to do to improve his behavior, as do we all.

When I was in youth group, we would sing *Fire and Rain*, by James Taylor, as part of the friendship circle song session at the end of each gathering. The trouble for a Jewish group comes in the line that begins, "Won't you look down upon me, Jesus?" Youth groupers would shout out "**Moses**" in place of "Jesus." It was all in fun, but it was a mistake, for several reasons.

Yes, it was disrespectful to Christianity and the songwriter, but for our purposes tonight, the problem was that, while Moses and Jesus have parallel roles in the Jewish and Christian redemption stories, they are otherwise dissimilar. Moses is God's primary human agent of freedom in the Exodus, while Jesus is God's primary human agent of salvation in the Passion and Resurrection. Moses, though, is always human—and consequently, flawed. By contrast, Christianity understands Jesus to be God incarnate, that is, in the flesh, and therefore perfect.

There is a profound message in Moses's imperfection. When God first appears to him in the burning bush, calling him to go to Pharaoh, proclaiming, "Let my people go!", Moses tries to decline the "invitation." He claims that he is not up to the task. The people won't listen to him. He's a poor public speaker.^{vii} In short, he is imperfect and therefore unfit for the task.

Ultimately, God loses patience with Moses, making clear that God's choice is final, but God does not dispute that Moses is imperfect. Instead, God provides what Rabbi Lauren Tuchman calls "a reasonable accommodation," acknowledging Moses's speech impediment and sending Aaron to do the talking for Moses.^{viii} Yes, God seems to say, Moses is imperfect, making him perfect for the task.

The Exodus is Judaism's ancient and best-known redemption story, but it is not our only promise of salvation. Instead, our tradition teaches that still greater redemption is yet to come, a messianic dream of a perfect future. Sages of the Talmud suggested that everyone has a role in bringing that ultimate redemption. Specifically, they taught that, should every Jewish person observe Shabbat perfectly, two weeks in a row, messianic redemption will follow.^{ix} They did not say, "every righteous Jew," and they certainly didn't say, "every Jew who does not sin." Everyone can be part of bringing the world closer to redemption.

Most people's opinions of themselves are either too high or too low—most often, both. We believe ourselves to be good, even great, so there is nothing more we must do for others—for the poor, for marginalized individuals and communities, for our loved ones at their times of trouble. By contrast, all-too-aware of our faults, we may imagine ourselves too tainted to perform מצוות, to make the world a better place.

The example of Moses, with all his flaws, offers us a profound two-part lesson:

1. None of us is so great that we cannot do better. We have work to do, and it begins with ourselves. We have a duty to bring our best selves to the other people in our lives, to our community, to humanity, and ultimately, to God. Then, like Moses, we will be best equipped to go to the Pharaohs of today, crying out for the freedom of all God's people.

2. None of us is so sinful that we are disqualified from doing our part to make the world a better place. Perhaps, then, Korach, the rebel of our Torah portion, is a metaphor, the voice inside telling us that we are no good, that we are unworthy of partnering with God to bring a perfect future, a voice we must repel.

None of us is too good for God, and neither are we impermissibly inadequate. Instead, each of us has the power to raise our voices, to roll up our sleeves, to open our pocketbooks, to give of ourselves. The מצוות, our religious obligations, are our responsibility and our privilege, to bring all the world to the realization of God's greatest promise, the promise of peace.

Amen.

ⁱ Numbers 16:3.

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Jacob Chatinover, "The Entire People Is Holy," *(M)Oral Torah from T'ruah*, June 25, 2025.

ⁱⁱⁱ Numbers 11:11.

^{iv} Numbers 20:2-11.

^v Genesis 17:1.

^{vi} Leviticus 19:2.

^{vii} Exodus 3:11, 13; 4:1, 10, 13.

^{viii} Exodus 4:14-16. Lauren Tuchman, "Moses, Internalized Oppression, and Disability," *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, CCAR Press, 2021, pp. 83-87.

^{ix} Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 118b.