

Moses at Meribah Speech, Scepter and Sanctification

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From the very beginning of creating the world God foresaw Moses, who would be called *ki-tov* ("that he is good" – Exod. 2:2) and who would forfeit his life because of waters. Therefore on the second day of creation, when God created the waters, He did not say *ki-tov* ("that it is good").

Genesis Rabbah 4:6

I

Anyone who attends to the Hebrew Bible knows that it contains many passages which call out, as the ancient rabbis put it, *darsheni* ("interpret me")! One passage which has called thus for interpretation from the very beginnings of Biblical exegesis until our own day, and which some commentators have claimed to be the most puzzling passage of all,¹ is the account of Moses' sin at the Waters of Meribah (Numbers 20:1-13):

The Israelites arrived in a body at the Wilderness of Zin on the first new moon [of the fortieth year²], 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. The people quarreled with Moses, saying, "If only we had perished when our brothers perished at the instance of the Lord!³ Why have you brought the Lord's congregation into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die there? 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!"

Moses and Aaron came away from the congregation to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and fell on their faces. The Presence of the Lord appeared to them, and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before

their very eyes order the rock to yield its water.⁴ Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts.”

Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as He had commanded him. 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?” And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank.

But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “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.” Those are the Waters of Meribah⁵ – meaning that the Israelites quarreled with the Lord – through which He affirmed His sanctity.⁶

Here we are at the end of forty years of wandering and testing in the wilderness. The Exodus generation has died and a new generation is preparing to enter the Promised Land. Moses and Aaron are told that, because of their failure of faith at the Waters of Meribah, not only will they not be allowed to lead the people into that land, but they must forfeit their very lives for their sin.⁷ They are to be buried, along with the rest of the wilderness generation, just outside of the Promised Land. Here is how the Book of Numbers describes their punishments:

Setting out from Kadesh, the Israelites arrived in a body at Mount Hor. At Mount Hor, on the boundary of the land of Edom, the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Let Aaron be gathered to his kin: he is not to enter the land that I have given to the Israelite people, because you disobeyed my command about the Waters of Meribah” (Num. 20:22–24).

The Lord said to Moses, “Ascend these heights of Abarim and view the land that I have given to the Israelite people. When you have seen it, you too shall be gathered to your kin, just as your brother Aaron was. For, in the Wilderness of Zin, when the community was contentious, you disobeyed My command to uphold My sanctity in their sight by means of the water.” Those are the Waters of Meribah-Kadesh, in the Wilderness of Zin (Num. 27:12–14).

The condemnation of Moses and Aaron in these passages is even stronger than it was earlier: Not only did they lack the faith necessary to affirm God’s sanctity before the people (20:12), but they actively spurned God’s command.⁸

On the simplest level our text requires us to ask it two connected questions: (1) What was God’s command to Moses and Aaron? (2) In what way did they fail to fulfill it? More specifically, what constituted the lack of faith whereby they failed to affirm God’s sanctity in the eyes of Israel? But behind these questions lurks an even more troubling one: Why does the Bible, by its elliptical expression, encourage and even demand such potentially disturbing questions for which there do not appear to be self-evident answers within the text? The pathos of Moses’ death outside the Land, despite his merits, despite his closeness to God and despite his pleading with God, is repeatedly expressed in the Bible.⁹ Given Moses’ central place in the Biblical narrative, why are we not explicitly told where he went wrong, and thereby the justice of God’s judgment of him?

Before addressing these questions let us focus on an earlier, similar Biblical passage – one that stands backstage, barely noticed at first, but once brought forward enables us to view the story of the Waters of Meribah in sharper relief. The passage is Exod. 17:1–7:

From the Wilderness of Sin the whole Israelite community continued by stages as the Lord would command. They encamped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses. “Give us water to drink,” they said; and Moses replied to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you try the Lord?” But the people thirsted there for water and the people grumbled against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, “What shall I do with this people? Before long they will be stoning me!” Then the Lord said to Moses, “Pass before the people, take with you some of the elders of Israel, and take along the rod with which you struck the Nile, and set out. I will be standing there before you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock and water will issue from it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. The place was named Massah [“Trial”] and Meribah [“Quarrel”], because the Israelites quarreled and because they tried the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord present among us or not?”

The similarities between the two stories in which Moses produces water from a rock are obvious. It is likely that these two narratives have a common origin; that is, they are two versions of what was

once a single story.¹⁰ But in their present redacted contexts within the larger narrative of Israel's journey from Egypt to Canaan they describe two events, one at the beginning of that journey, just prior to the revelation at Sinai, the other at its conclusion, just prior to the conquest of Canaan.¹¹ Because of their similarities and their places at opposite ends of the overarching narrative, it is impossible to read of the latter event without remembering the former to which it alludes by way of contrast.

In both narratives the people quarrel with Moses when they reach a place without water, complaining that it would have been better to have remained in Egypt than to die of thirst in the desert. In both Moses turns to God for instruction on how to respond. In both God commands Moses to take the rod, and in both Moses strikes a rock with that rod, bringing forth water. In both the place is given a name memorializing the people's quarreling, and in both cases that name includes "Meribah."

But the differences between the two stories are also many, and those differences are significant, demanding of attention and suggestive of meaning, precisely because of the already noted similarities of their narratives. The Rephidim story, in stating the people's demand for water and for an explanation of why Moses brought them to die in the wilderness, emphasizes their challenge to Moses' prophetic leadership, and thereby their trying of God. Claiming to be God's prophetic agent, Moses knows that it is he who will be stoned if they are not satisfied with drink. In asking "Is the Lord present among us or not?" the people challenge Moses to demonstrate God's presence and power among them. This he successfully does "in the sight of the elders," that is, the people's representatives, by miraculously producing water from the rock.

By contrast, the Kadesh story similarly states the people's complaint about the lack of water and their fear of dying in the wilderness, but omits their demand, "Give us water to drink." By this time their complaint has turned to one of despair, and it is to this despair that Moses must now respond.¹² In this context the Kadesh story emphasizes Moses' failure to affirm God's sanctity (that is, to convey in words and deeds the power of God's otherness - His power to

transform and transfuse nature and history) "in the sight of the Israelite people." In the first instance, at Rephidim, Moses succeeds in satisfying the people's needs, in quelling their rebellion and convincing them of his authority as God's agent. At Kadesh he similarly succeeds in satisfying the people, but he fails to use this as an opportunity or vehicle for conveying to them an immediate experience of God's providential power. Put another way: At Rephidim the people try God through Moses His agent, while at Kadesh God tries Moses through His people.

There are also other, more subtle differences between the two stories, differences relating to the use of speech and scepter. At Rephidim Moses is told to "take along the rod with which you struck the Nile," presumably to be used again in a similar way. At Kadesh God is less clear, saying only, "Take the rod." At Kadesh, too, the people remember the recent rebellion of Korah and his company, their destruction and the subsequent plague (Num. 16-17). After that event, not long before our story, God causes the staff of the tribe of Levi (Aaron, but also Moses) to blossom as a sign of its leadership. That rod is placed before the ark in the Tent of Meeting "as a lesson to rebels, so that their mutterings against Me may cease, lest they die" (17:25). When Moses takes "the rod from the Lord" in Num. 20:9, it is not clear, as it was in Exod. 17:6, how that rod is to be used: to strike the rock or to be displayed as a warning of the consequences of Israel's rebelliousness.¹³

Note as well the different placement of Moses' verbal responses to the people's complaints. At Rephidim Moses first tries verbally to quiet the people himself. When they persist he cries in desperation to God for help. God instructs him to perform the miracle, which he does without word. But at Kadesh Moses and Aaron, upon hearing the people's complaint, go directly to the Tent of Meeting, where they prostrate themselves and behold the Divine Glory. God instructs them to perform the miracle, whereupon they appear to follow His instructions, taking the rod and assembling the congregation before the rock. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, the stage all set for the miracle, Moses verbally rebukes the people as "rebels" and asks whether they expect him and Aaron to produce water for them from

the rock. At Rephidim Moses speaks to the people before consulting God, but is silent for the miracle; at Kadesh he is silent before consulting God and only speaks when the people are ready for the miracle, thus heightening the dramatic impact of his speech.¹⁴ Finally, at Rephidim God tells Moses that He will stand before him at the rock, overseeing the success of the miracle and impressing upon the people its numinous power; no such divine accompaniment is mentioned at Kadesh.

Of all these differences, I wish to emphasize those between God's instruction to Moses at Rephidim and at Kadesh. At Rephidim He instructs Moses exactly: Take the rod (the one with which you struck the Nile), assemble the elders, I will be standing with you, strike the rock, water will come and the people will drink. In the Kadesh story, however, God is less complete and more ambiguous in his directions: Take the rod (which rod? – and what shall Moses do with it?), assemble the community, speak to the rock (saying what?) in their sight, the rock will yield water and the people will drink.

In these differences of detail between God's instructions to Moses at Rephidim and at Kadesh lies a crucial interpretative crux: Are we to assume that at Kadesh the narrator is being elliptical in his description of what took place, while God was as explicit in his instructions to Moses as before (leaving the interpreter with the task of providing the missing details)? Or that God is being expressly elliptical in his instructions to Moses (leaving to Moses the task of interpreting God's charge)? Are the narrative silences to be supplied with words, or are they to be left silent and supplied with meaning?¹⁵ For now, let us simply note again our story's silences: At the Waters of Meribah Moses is *not* instructed what to do with the rod or what to say to the rock, nor is he assured as before that God will be present to supervise the success of the miracle. Told what his tools (rod and speech), location (rock) and audience (the whole people) are to be, Moses is not told how to use (or not use) those tools at that location so as to sanctify God in the eyes of that audience. Do these silences have any relation to the other characteristics of our story which distinguish it from its look-alike in Exod. 17:1–7, as from the Torah's other stories of rebellion and miracle?

II

Before continuing with my interpretation of Moses and the Waters of Meribah: It should be clear that my primary purpose is neither to determine the Biblical passage's "correct" meaning(s) in its own ancient literary, historical or theological terms, nor to recount or endorse the traditions of that passage's interpretation through the ages. Rather, I shall propose a present-day reading of our passage which makes sense to me as a committed (if not always believing) member of Israel who engages the Biblical text as living Torah. Such a committed reading, however, need not divorce itself from a critical understanding of the Biblical text in its own contexts or of the history of past interpretations in their contexts; it will be cognizant of and conditioned by both.

The oldest interpretations of Moses' crime and punishment are found within the Hebrew Bible itself. In three brief passages in Deuteronomy it is suggested that Moses was punished not because of his own wrongdoing but that of the Israelites. This view is most clearly stated in Deut. 1:37. There, upon hearing the report of the returned spies, the Israelites encamped at Kadesh-Barnea (the same as our Kadesh) refuse to enter the Promised Land for fear of its inhabitants. Moses relates God's response to their lack of faith as follows (Deut. 1:34–38):

When the Lord heard your loud complaint, He was angry. He vowed: Not one of these men, this evil generation, shall see the good land that I swore to give to your fathers. . . . Because of you the Lord was incensed with me too, and He said: You shall not enter it either. Joshua son of Nun, who attends you, he shall enter it. Imbue him with strength, for he shall allot it to Israel.

This passage, as usually interpreted, states that Moses is being punished along with the Exodus generation for their lack of faith in responding to the spies; he as their leader shares responsibility for their deeds. This implies that Moses' punishment is no longer caused by the Waters of Meribah episode. But another interpretation is possible: In retelling the story of Israel's journey from Egypt and in admonishing the people on the eve of the conquest of the Land to be faithful to

the covenant, Moses recalls how their unfaithfulness *both* prevented the Exodus generation from entering the Land (because of the spy episode), and resulted in his own similar punishment (now alluding to the earlier Waters of Meribah episode).

In either case, Moses' lament that he is being punished because of the unfaithful, rebellious behavior of the people is repeated twice more in Deuteronomy:

But the Lord was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me (3:26).

Now the Lord was angry with me on your account and swore that I should not cross the Jordan and enter the good land that the Lord our God is giving you as a heritage (4:21).

In these passages it is unclear whether Moses is alluding to the people's unfaithfulness in the spy episode or at the Waters of Meribah (both at Kadesh). Whichever it is, Moses is portrayed as a victim of the people's conduct, his own failing going unmentioned (perhaps not surprising, since he is now the narrator).¹⁶ Thus the Book of Deuteronomy already contains two views of Moses' punishment: one, that he was punished for the people's rebellious behavior, being either innocent of sin or unwitting, and the other (Deut. 32:51) that he and Aaron were punished for their own inadequate conduct at the Waters of Meribah.

We find the first attempt to reconcile these two views later in the Bible itself. In a catalog of Israel's sins and punishments we read in Psalms 106:32-33:

They provoked wrath at the waters of Meribah
and Moses suffered on their account,
because they rebelled against Him
and he spoke rashly.¹⁷

While the Hebrew original of this passage has its difficulties, it interprets the Waters of Meribah episode in two significant ways: (1) Moses' tragic end is caused by his *unwitting* response to the people's rebelliousness, and (2) his mistake is to be found in his rash *speech* to the people. These interpretations and their paradoxical interrelationship can be traced from inner-Biblical to present-day exegesis. They

enable the interpreter to empathize both with Moses in his failure and with God in His judgment, two tendencies which need to be held in dialectical tension lest they negate each other.

III

Once the Bible with its story of Moses' failure at the Waters of Meribah became fully canonical, interpretation shifted from ambiguous allusion to, or partial paraphrase of, that story to elaborate elucidation of its very language. As suggested earlier, this meant not only interpreting the words of the text but also filling in the silences between them. Such fleshing out of the narrative silences of our passage needed to take its cues, at least in part, from the words which framed those silences. The resulting interpretation could be simultaneously a meta-narrative and a commentary. I shall comment upon one such example, itself an editorial composite:¹⁸

"Speak to the rock" (Num. 20:8): "Strike [the rock]" was not said. God said to Moses: "When a lad is young his master may hit him in order to teach him. But when he is older his teacher admonishes him with speech." Similarly, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: "When this rock was small you struck it, as it says, 'Strike the rock' (Exod. 17:6). But now 'Speak to the rock.' Teach one lesson before it and produce water from the rock."

This midrash explains the new emphasis on speech in God's instruction to Moses at Kadesh as compared with Rephidim. With the passing of time the rock has matured (as, we may presume, have Moses and the people), now requiring a new method of admonition. Note the rabbinization of the Biblical story, conveying the message that the power of Moses' speech lies in his power to teach Oral Torah. The midrash continues:

"You shall produce water for them from the rock" (Num. 20:8): You shall produce water by the strength and merit of [the Patriarchs] sleeping in the Cave of Machpelah. For *sela* ("rock") refers to the merit of the Patriarchs, as it says, "Let the inhabitants of Sela exult" (Isa. 42:11).

By focusing on the word "rock" and its inner-Biblical associations, this interpretation suggests that Moses had another source of strength

upon which to draw, namely the accumulated merits of his patriarchal ancestors. The rock has come to represent the paradoxical joining of death and life in the story.

"Moses and Aaron assembled (*va-yakhilu*) the congregation" (Num. 20:10): Above it is written, "They joined (*va-yikahalu*) against Moses and Aaron" (20:2). Why did they [need to] gather them? Moses and Aaron were walking [to the rock] with all of Israel behind them. But the Israelites would spot [another] rock and gather around it. Now there is no generation without its scoffers. [These] said to the people, "Do you not know that Moses was Jethro's shepherd and that shepherds are knowledgeable in locating water [in the wilderness]? Moses wishes to draw us to a place where there is already water and to say, 'Behold, I have produced for you water,' thereby tricking us. Rather, let him produce water from this rock or from that rock." For the Holy One, blessed be He, had commanded Moses to produce water from whichever rock the people wanted. Then Moses turned around, thinking that Israel was behind him, only to see them gathered in groups by the various rocks. He said to them, "Come with me and I will produce for you water." They said, "We want water from this rock, and if you do not produce water from this one, then we do not desire water from another." Moses' face reddened with anger and he swore that he would not produce water for them except from the rock that he had chosen. R. Judah b. Simon in the name of R. Joshua b. Levi (third century C.E.) said: "Moses struck the rock and all the rocks in the wilderness split and produced water, as it says, 'He split rocks in the wilderness' (Ps. 78:15)."

This is an implicit explanation of Moses' rhetorical question to the people (Num. 20:10), "Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you from *this* rock?" Moses' angry and resentful response to the people is now portrayed against their unexpected, taunting challenge of him. The interpretation is occasioned by attention to the textual detail of Moses' gathering of the people and their gathering against him being expressed in Hebrew with the identical verb (unvocalized). The retold story also draws support from the use of "rocks" in the plural in Psalms.

"Because you did not trust Me" (20:12): The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "You should have learned from Hagar, as it says, 'She saw a well of water' (Gen. 21:19). If for this single one [Ishmael] who had the merit of his father to his credit I raised a well, how much more [should I provide water for] Israel who have the merit of the Patriarchs

and the merit of the Torah which they received and the merit of the commandments to their credit." Another interpretation: [God said to Moses:] "You had only to learn from what happened to you at Rephidim. For there you said, 'Before long they will be stoning me' (Exod. 17:4). And I said to you: 'Why are you denouncing my children? Pass before the people (17:5): let the rod in your hand pass.'"

Here, in the interpretation of God's condemnation of Moses after the event, we find a recurrence of motifs expressed in conjunction with the interpretation of God's instructions to Moses before the event: the merits of the Patriarchs, the power of Torah teaching and observance, and the differentiation of Kadesh from Rephidim. God explains that at Rephidim, where Moses verbally denounced the people before the miracle, the rod was the proper instrument for the miracle. But now at Kadesh, where Moses had not abused language before the miracle, speech was the preferred instrument for the miracle.¹⁹

In this midrash several parts of our Biblical passage have been interpreted and several silences have been filled in. The essential thrust of this rabbinic rereading, however, is not very different from the earliest inner-Biblical interpretations which, as we saw, both portrayed Moses' failure as deriving from the people's incitement of him and identified it with his failure of speech. That interpretation is presented now more fully through the combining of commentary with narrative enhancement: Moses, prepared to repeat the miracle performed at Rephidim at a rock of his or God's choosing, is unable to muster the necessary trust in the prophetic power of his speech to spontaneously sanctify God in the people's eyes in a new and unexpected situation of conflict with them.

This midrashic reading of the story, like all others whether ancient or modern, midrashic or critical, begins with and is fundamentally built upon an interpretation of God's instructions to Moses in Num. 20:8. Since, as we have seen, that verse is poor in its specifics and rich in its silences, the details of God's instructions to Moses must be inferred from elsewhere. Such inferences have been drawn in several ways over the history of our passage's interpretation:

If it is assumed that the miracle at Kadesh is to be performed like the earlier, similar one at Rephidim, then the details of God's instruc-

tions in Exod. 17:5-6 could be transferred to Num. 20:8. Thus, it might be supposed that the rod at Kadesh was to be used to strike the rock, as it had been at Rephidim.²⁰ However, as the above midrash assumes, and as I argued earlier, the two stories should be contrasted as much as compared. If so, then God's instructions to Moses at Rephidim could not simply be transferred to Kadesh.

Since Moses' improper words and actions are recounted in Num. 20:9-11, might we infer from them what his words and actions should have been according to God's instructions in Num. 20:8? Such inferences are not so simple. For example, since Moses actually hit the rock twice, are we to infer that he was not to hit the rock at all, or that he was to hit it only once? Since he is faulted for his rash words to the people, are we to infer that he was not to address the people at all, or to address them at a different time or in a different manner? And how, indeed, are we to know if Moses sinned with his rod, with his words, or with both?

Since God accuses Moses and Aaron of not trusting in Him enough to affirm His sanctity before the people (20:12), it may be assumed that the key to recovering the details of God's instruction to Moses and to discovering the essence of Moses' mistake lies in a correct understanding of that accusation. But since the idea of "sanctification" does not appear in any of the previous stories of Moses' miraculous responses to the people's murmurings, its meaning here is far from self-evident. Did Moses fail to sanctify God because he failed to execute His instructions exactly or immediately, because he said something that caused the people to doubt God's power, because he himself doubted God's power, because he displayed anger, or because of some combination of these?²¹

Interpreters of this passage, whether ancient, medieval or modern, have assumed that God gave Moses specific instructions on how to perform the miracle, and that Moses – even if unintentionally – failed in some specific way to carry out those instructions, whether with regard to his rod, his speech, or a combination of the two. But the methods used for filling in such silences in our text, while often clever or homiletically effective, have been arbitrary in their presuppositions, circular in their reasoning, and linguistically or syntactically insensi-

tive in their manipulation of the Biblical text. Might not another approach allow our text's silences their own eloquence?

IV

One of the most common interpretations of Moses' failure at the Waters of Meribah is that he was to produce water for the Israelites by speaking to the rock and not by striking it with his staff as he had done at Rephidim.²² What then is the purpose of God's instruction to Moses (and Aaron) in Num. 20:8 to "take the rod"? The next verse emphasizes that Moses "took the rod from before the Lord as He had commanded him." This, his only action in explicit accord with God's command, cannot be of inconsequence. But neither can it simply be assumed that the rod was to be used as it had been at Rephidim.

In previous Biblical stories, the rod which Moses and Aaron wield in the performance of miracles is employed not only to strike but also to stretch forth over or toward the object of the miracle. The rod, an extended arm, symbolizes the divine power which effects wondrous signs through the agency of Moses and Aaron.²³ To complicate matters further, we should remember that the most recent reference to the rod is in Numbers 17, where it is used to assert the divinely authorized leadership of the tribe of Levi (Aaron and Moses), and where it is placed "before the Lord" in the Tent of Meeting as a warning against Israel's rebelliousness (17:22,25). This incident is alluded to in our passage, when the people remember the earlier sudden death of their compatriots (20:3) and when Moses takes the rod "from before the Lord" (20:9).²⁴

When God instructs Moses at Kadesh to take the rod, He is silent as to how it is to be used. Several possibilities may have occurred to Moses: to strike the rock with the rod; to stretch out the rod over the rock; to display the rod before the people as a sign of his and Aaron's divinely vested authority as God's agents and as a reminder of God's displeasure with their rebelliousness.²⁵ Interpreting our passage's silence, we may suggest that at Kadesh God left it to Moses to decide how best to use that rod, with its long history of varied associations, in performing the miracle in the eyes of the people.

V

From the very beginnings of interpretation of this story, exegetes have focused their attention on Moses' words of rebuke to the Israelites in Num. 20:10: "Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?" If at least part of Moses' misconduct lies here, what role had God intended for Moses' speech in the performance of the miracle?

In Num. 20:8, after instructing Moses and Aaron to take the rod and to assemble the congregation, God says, "Speak to (*v'dibartem el*) the rock before their eyes and it will give its waters." As traditionally understood, God directs Moses to command the rock to produce water. However, as early as Nahmanides (1194-1274) and as recently as the latest scholarly treatments of our passage (1983), another reading has been proposed: God instructs Moses to speak not to the rock but to the people, preparing them for the miracle at the rock. Moses is to announce to the people the miracle he is about to perform in such a way that they will fully understand and appreciate its significance as an expression of God's providential power. But the miracle itself is to be performed *in silence*.²⁶

This suggestion is based on the fact that the Hebrew preposition *el* can mean not only "to" but also "in regard to, concerning" and "by, at" (a place).²⁷ However, the Hebrew syntax of Num. 20:8, continuing as it does with "and it will give its water," does not easily support such an interpretation. The Hebrew more easily supports the common understanding that Moses is instructed to produce water from the rock by speaking to it. What is not at all clear in Num. 20:8 is which words Moses is to employ in speaking to the rock and how he is to employ them. For example, should he command the rock, adjure it, or invoke before it the divine name? Perhaps again, as with God's instruction to take the rod, Moses himself must decide how he will use speech to perform the miracle in such a way as to positively impress upon the people God's power.

Jacob Milgrom, in trying to support the textually dubious interpretation that Moses was commanded to speak to the people at the rock, makes a significant observation: Never before has Moses employed or been instructed to employ human speech to effect a miracle.

Moses performs earlier miracles in silence, with gestures but not with words. At most, he introduces them with announcements of their theological import.²⁸ Only later in the Bible, beginning with Moses' successor Joshua (in Josh. 10:12, commanding the sun and moon to stand still), do Israelite leaders perform miracles with words as well as with gestures, and at their own initiative.²⁹

There are three ways to interpret the fact that *only here in the whole Torah* is Moses commanded to perform a miracle principally through speech: (1) This miracle is simply an inexplicable anomaly within the Torah. (2) Our text is either corrupt and needs emendation, or it needs to be radically reread, even to the point of stretching its language so as to arrive at a meaning consistent with Moses' non-verbal miracles elsewhere. (3) Our text is to be read as it stands, *in contrast* to the other accounts of miracles performed by Moses. In the last case, it would be not just an exception to the rule but a transition between an earlier model of prophetic miracle in which speech initiated by the prophet plays little or no role, and a later model of prophetic miracle in which speech initiated by the prophet (even if assumed to represent the "word of God") plays a greater role in the prophet's performance of miracles intended to demonstrate God's providential power and presence.

Since the story of the Waters of Meribah is narratively placed at the end of Moses' career, on the eve of the people's conquest of the Promised Land and thus at an important historical point of transition, we shall take seriously this third possibility. *God's requirement of Moses to employ, initiate and trust human speech in performing a miracle on His behalf may be interpreted as marking an important transition in the intermediary role of the prophet.* This is a transition which Moses, who is "slow of speech" (Exod. 4:10), proves unable to make, a failure which requires that he yield prophetic leadership as Israel enters a new stage in its sacred history.³⁰

VI

After reading how Moses miraculously provided abundant water from the rock for the people and their animals to drink, we encounter

God's abrupt response to Moses' actions and words: "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). Moses' sin is twofold: lack of trust in God, and a resulting failure to demonstrate His sanctity in the eyes of the people at a time when they were despairing of hope in the outcome of their redemption.³¹ This emphasis on Moses' failure to sanctify God before the people is repeated in Num. 27:14 and in Deut. 32:51.

The idea that humans can sanctify God is unique to our passage and its parallels within the whole Torah, and is found only rarely in the Prophets.³² The closest we come to the idea of humans having the power to sanctify God through their actions is found in Lev. 22:31-32:

You shall faithfully observe My commandments: I am the Lord. You shall not profane My holy name, that I may be sanctified in the midst of the Israelite people – I the Lord who sanctify you, I who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God, I the Lord.

Here, through the observance of God's commandments, Israel causes God to be sanctified.

While the idea that humans, especially the righteous, are able to sanctify God through their deeds and words runs throughout rabbinic literature, it is given only scant mention in the Bible.³³ Interestingly, its clearest and most emphatic Biblical expression, albeit in a negative way, is to be found in the story of the Waters of Meribah. This principle is not invoked in relation to any other story of complaint or miracle in the Torah. At Kadesh, on the eve of the conquest of the Promised Land, Moses is tested with a new challenge: Ambiguously instructed to employ scepter and speech at the rock in the view of the people, yet left to face their murmurings and despair without the visible support of the Divine Glory, Moses fails to use the opportunity of their thirst and unrest to sanctify God, that is, to display His awesome providential power "before their eyes." Satisfying their thirst and repressing once more their rebellion is no longer sufficient. Moses fails to go beyond these immediate needs to a greater need of that time: to convert the people to a trust in God's redemptive power.

VII

It is at this point that the three characteristics of the Waters of Meribah story which are unique, both in comparison to its closest parallel in the Rephidim story and among the other miracle and rebellion stories of the Torah, need to be joined together: (1) Here alone God is reticent in His instructions to Moses, specifying neither what to do with the rod nor what to say to the rock. (2) Here alone Moses is told to effect a miracle primarily through speech. (3) Here alone Moses is judged for his failure to sanctify God before the people. Each acquires meaning in combination with the others.

It is significant that God is not visibly present for the miracle as he was on similar past occasions.³⁴ Moses now stands alone before the people, facing their complaints and their despair. Without the Divine Glory to authenticate the miracle in their eyes, he must himself determine how to employ rod and speech so as to sanctify God before them – a new responsibility. And it is the element of speech which is particularly new in our story and unique among the stories of murmuring and miracle in the Torah. While the rod is to have a role, it is Moses' speech which is to be the principal instrument for accomplishing the miracle and the sanctification of God through it. But speech poses so many choices: Which are the right words, the right inflections of voice, the right gestures of face and hand (with its rod) for impressing upon the people the sanctity of the moment?³⁵

In Judaism, human sanctification of God in the realms of ritual and prayer often depends on words accompanied by physical gestures. Speech may articulate the sacred purpose to which an otherwise ordinary gesture is dedicated, and conversely a gesture may signal that words of blessing or prayer are not mere utterances but expressions of full intention (*kavanah*). The combination of speech and action, in different proportions for different occasions, transforms and transcends both in the subsuming act of sanctification, which transfuses and transmutes the natural with the power of the numinous in ways that neither speech nor action alone can accomplish.

In ritual and liturgical settings, the specific words and gestures to be employed for sanctification may be specified by law (*halakhah*) or

by custom (*minhag*), and hence can be repeated.³⁶ But in the ethical contexts of social and political interrelations, which Judaism also sees as proper contexts for the human sanctification of God, the words and actions necessary for sanctification cannot be prescribed or patterned for repetition. In such contexts a person must not only *recognize* the opportunity for sanctification, but must *choose* and *trust* human words and deeds capable of effecting such sanctification in the eyes of others.

Moses' failure to trust in God was a failure to trust in the power of his own speech, accompanied by a physical gesture, to effect the miracle in such a way as to affirm God's providential power in the eyes of the people. This is a twofold failure: (1) Moses shrinks from employing speech to produce water, relying on his tried and true rod, and (2) he directs his speech instead at the people in words of rebuke. Together, the double striking of the rock and the words of rebuke toward the people are expressions of his anger. He fails to understand both the positive power his speech could have in effecting the miracle and in sanctifying God before the people, and the negative effects his angry words could have on the people's confidence in God and in Moses His prophet.

A lack of trust in the creative power of speech to sanctify God, and a failure to recognize the destructive power of speech to alienate other humans, are two sides of a common coin. Moses, accustomed to repeating God's words to the people, is now called upon to shape his own words so as to sanctify God in their eyes, that is, to convert their despair into trust and hope. Instead, lacking confidence in his powers of speech, he succumbs to his own anger and resentment of his charges: "Listen, you rebels," he says to them tauntingly upon returning from the Tent of Meeting, rod in hand, "shall we produce water for you from this rock?" What a question to ask at this moment of despondent thirst!

As a consequence of Moses' lack of trust in his speech, leadership passes to Joshua and a series of judges and prophets who, while not enjoying Moses' "mouth-to-mouth" intimacy with God, live and act in greater intimacy with the people. Moses' successors take the initiative wherever opportunities occur to employ their powers of speech

to engage in legal decision-making, healing, feeding and warfare on behalf of the people. Employing divinely inspired but humanly shaped speech, they act in such ways as to impress upon the people God's providential power *within* the social, political and cultic contexts of settled Israelite life; their goal is to reform that collective life and its institutional structures in the hope of molding Israel into a holy people. This is a role for which Moses, great lawgiver and intercessor that he is, proves unsuited.

VIII

Two textual problems remain: Why, if Moses' error is his failure to sanctify God in the eyes of the people, does our passage ironically end by stating that, at the Waters of Meribah, God "affirmed His sanctity"? And if Moses was the one who smote the rock and rebuked the people, why is Aaron also punished?

As to the first question, the final phrase, in fact the final word of our passage contains an interesting ambiguity. After God's address to Moses and Aaron in which He pronounces their sentence, our text concludes (translating literally): "These are the Waters of Meribah, where the Children of Israel quarreled with God and He was sanctified in them" (20:13). The final "in them" could refer back to the waters, or to the people, or to Moses and Aaron.³⁷ If "them" refers to the waters or the people, the interpretation would run something like this: Despite Moses' failure to act in such a way as to sanctify God in the eyes of the people, God produces water from the rock for the people (lest their thirst and despair grow worse still), thereby affirming His redemptive power. While Moses fails to sanctify God as He had "hoped," that is, by giving the people not only an example of His redemptive power but a model for the power of human speech to effect that redemption, God causes Himself nonetheless to be sanctified "in them," that is "through the Waters of Meribah" or "among the people."³⁸

A more radical interpretation suggests that God is sanctified through Moses and Aaron. When they sanctify Him before the people, He sanctifies Himself by means of their punishment.³⁹ This

idea, that sanctification occurs through the execution of divine justice even at the expense of those closest to God, is found in the story of God's killing of Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu (Lev. 10:3):

Through those close to Me I show myself holy,
And assert My authority before all the people.⁴⁰

As to the second question, as far back as the third century C.E. the rabbis expressed the unfairness of Aaron's punishment:

You accused him falsely. For if Moses said, "Listen, you rebels," what did Aaron and Miriam do [to deserve death]?⁴¹

Our Biblical passage, in its switching from singular to plural in its portrayal of the people's quarrel with Moses (and Aaron) and of God's instructions to Moses (and Aaron), has caused commentators considerable difficulties. Yet the net impression is that, despite Aaron's involvement, it is Moses who is the principal protagonist of the story. But if, as I have suggested, the rod with which Moses strikes the rock is also the rod of Aaron earlier placed in the Tent of Meeting, and if Moses speaks through the mouth of Aaron,⁴² then Moses' dual sin of speech and gesture is also Aaron's. As one commentary states:

From here we learn that one who assists a transgressor is as the transgressor. Aaron could have said, "I didn't sin." But he was silent and suppressed his feelings and did not speak in his own defense.⁴³

Or perhaps Aaron, still stunned by the death of his sons, in response to which he was silent, participated in Moses' error at the Waters of Meribah by his continuing silence, a transgression no less than Moses' sin of speech.

IX

Let us return, finally, to a question that I posed at the outset: Why has our passage asked us to ask it so many questions, making us labor so hard over its language in order to understand its meaning? Why did it not reveal plainly the nature of Moses' sin at Meribah?

The rabbis saw in the metaphor of striking a rock (Jer. 23:29) an allusion to the interpretation of Scripture.⁴⁴ Moses at the Waters of

Meribah was required not simply to follow directions which had worked in the past, but to learn to use a new sort of double-headed instrument. He was to strike the rock with language of his own choosing and shaping, so that the rock would yield its life-sustaining waters to the community he served. But the care, courage and trust with which he was to employ that language in the presence of the community was to sustain them no less than the waters. He failed to grasp the sacred and social power of this instrument. He failed to appreciate it as more than an instrument.

Interpreters of Torah, successors to the prophets, stand in a similar relationship to their texts and audiences as Moses did to the rock and the people. They, like Moses, need to trust language without abusing it. Such trust requires care and courage in the repeated reshaping of the language of interpretation in relation to the language of Scripture, so as to inspire others to trust in both and thereby in the source of both. Furthermore, the interpreters of Torah, again like Moses; need to understand the interrelationship of the language of interpretation (*midrash*) with that of deed (*ma'aseh*), recombining the two as they are each continually reshaped in public, social view. They must also learn to recognize the meaning and power of silence without succumbing to silence, either before Scripture or before society.

A deep and pervading tension has run through my interpretation of Moses' errors at the Waters of Meribah. Beginning in the Biblical text, and continuing throughout the history of its interpretation, has been the recurring modality of sin and punishment: Moses acted wrongly, and therefore he was denied his dream; he died without entering the Promised Land as a consequence of his failure to fulfill his prophetic charge to sanctify God in the eyes of the people.

But running through my interpretation has also been the modality of transition: The conquest and settlement of the Promised Land required a new kind of prophetic leader, just as it required a new generation of the people. Moses, great leader and teacher that he was, was unable to become that new kind of prophet.

Is it possible to reconcile these two interpretive modalities, which emphasize respectively the themes of responsibility and destiny? I think not. Do they therefore negate each other? I think not. Respon-

sibility and destiny remain in dialectical tension within this story, as they do in life. Moses was tested and found lacking. But even had he correctly understood the nature of the test and the new kind of prophetic initiative and intuition that it demanded of him, it is not certain that his fate would have been different.⁴⁵

Returning to the interpreter, we can say that the Jewish responsibility, indeed obligation, to respond carefully, creatively and courageously to the Torah remains a source of strength and promise. We cannot avoid that responsibility by simply restating interpretations that have worked in the past. But even if our eyes and mouths are opened, we cannot be certain of our ability to interpret the Torah text as our history, situation and dreams require. Our destiny lies only partly in our own hands and tongues.

1. For example, Maimonides (in his *Shemonah Perakim*, chap. 4) describes our passage as "the most problematic passage of the Torah" (*safek mi-safke ha-torah*). I shall not attempt to survey all the efforts to identify Moses' transgression at the Waters of Meribah. Readers wishing to explore further can begin with two recent treatments which refer back to their predecessors: M. Margalio, "The Transgression of Moses and Aaron - Num. 20:1-13," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 74 (1983), pp. 196-228; Jacob Milgrom, "Magic, Monotheism, and the Sin of Moses," in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of George E. Mendenhall*, ed. H. B. Huffmon et al (Winona Lake, Indiana: 1983), pp. 251-65.

2. According to the itinerary in Num. 33:36-38, Kadesh precedes Mt. Hor, where Aaron dies in the fortieth year from the Exodus.

3. Cf. Num. 16.

4. Literally, "You shall speak to the rock before their eyes and it will give its water." I will return to this phrase below.

5. Meribah means "place of quarrel." The same name appears in Exod. 17:7, to be discussed below.

6. The translation of this Biblical passage, like the others given below, is from *The Torah: The Five Books of Moses* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962).

7. One early midrash states that Moses and Aaron died prematurely for their mistake. God says to Moses and Aaron: "Behold, if you had upheld My sanctity it would not yet have been your time to die" (*Sifre Num.* 137).

8. Cf. the parallel Deut. 32:48-52, which uses even stronger language.

9. Besides the passages already cited, our story is alluded to in Deut. 1:37, 3:23-28, 4:21, 31:2, 33:8; Psalms 78:15-20, 106:32.

10. The precise source-critical relationship of these two passages to one another is a matter of debate which cannot be entered into here. Most modern scholars assign Exod. 17:1-7 to the J(ahwist) or E(lohist) strand, and understand Num. 20:1-13 to be a later Priestly reworking, perhaps in several stages, of its elements. See Martin Noth, *Numbers* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: 1968), p. 144; and more extensively, George W. Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness: The Murmuring Motif in the Wilderness Traditions of the Old Testament* (Nashville: 1968), pp. 71-82.

11. Num. 33:14 places Rephidim immediately before the Wilderness of Sinai. For the placement of Kadesh, see above, note 2.

12. Num. 20:5 includes the Israelites' complaint, not found in Exod. 17:3 or elsewhere, that Moses has brought them to an infertile land, without grain, figs, vines or pomegranates. It would appear that they have despaired even of the Promised Land on the eve of their conquest of it.

13. Some commentators have asked whether the rod referred to here is that of Moses or of Aaron. It is not clear, however, that the rod of Aaron referred to in Num. 17 is any different from the one used by Moses and Aaron to perform the miracles in Egypt, and referred to in Exod. 17. See note 24 below.

14. The medieval commentator Abraham Ibn Ezra explains that Moses should have addressed the people only after the miracle was completed.

15. In a now classic essay comparing Biblical and Homeric narrative, Erich Auerbach (*Mimesis: The Representations of Reality in Western Literature*, Princeton: 1946, chap. 1) argues that the recurrent silences of the Biblical narratives are "fraught with background," veiling unexpressed "thoughts and feelings" which call to be unveiled through interpretation. While this accurately describes a midrashic tendency, I wish to suggest another interpretive possibility: Biblical narrative silences may also be part of the foreground of a story.

16. Some rabbinic interpretations suggest that Moses the prevented from entering the land for to sake of his generation, so that as their leader he would shepherd them into the land in messianic times. This vicarious interpretation of Moses' death derives from the ambiguous expressions "because of you" (*biglalkhem*) and "on your account" (*lem'ankhem*). See *Yelamdenu* in *Yalkut Shim'oni* 764; *Num. Rabbah* 19:13-14; *Tanhuma Hukkat* 10; *Tanhuma Hukkat* (ed. Buber) 32; and perhaps *Sifre Deut.* 29.

17. The translation is from *The Writings: Ketubim* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1982). The Hebrew phrase rendered "because they rebelled against Him" (*ki himru et ruho*) is ambiguous. Some take the object of the rebellion, or incitement, to be Moses rather than God.

18. This example, while not representing the full range of rabbinic interpretation of our passage, is fairly typical in its exegetical approach and overall thrust. It is from *Yelamdenu* in *Yalkut Shim'oni* 1:763 (to Num. 20). Other versions of this story are found in *Yalkut Shim'oni* 2:879 (to Ps. 78); *Tanhuma Hukkat* 9; *Tanhuma Hukkat* (ed. Buber) 29; *Num. Rabbah* 19:9; *Midrash Aggadah* and *Midrash Ha-gadol*, *ad loc.*; and *Midrash Petirat Aharon* (in A. Jellinek, *Bet Ha-midrash*, vol. 1), pp. 91-92. See also *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Elijah Mizrahi, *ad loc.*

19. See Abraham Gombiner, in his commentary *Zayit Ra'anan* to *Yalkut Shim'oni*.

20. As argued by Nahmanides, *ad loc.*; J. Milgrom, *op. cit.*, p. 253; M. Margalio, *op. cit.*, pp. 206-207.

21. These options are not arbitrary, but are all to be found in classical and modern interpretations.

22. See sources cited in note 18 above, plus Rashbam, S. D. Luzzatto, and Malbim, *ad loc.* According to *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* to Num. 20:7, God instructed Moses to speak to the rock, and if that failed, to strike it.

23. In Exod. 8:1-2, 9:22-23 and 10:12-13, Moses or Aaron stretches out the rod in producing the plagues. In Exod. 14:16, 21 and 26 Moses stretches out his hand and rod to divide and then return the Reed Sea, while in Exod. 17:9 Moses holds up his hand and rod so Israel will prevail over Amalek.

24. It is not clear whether this is a different rod from that used to perform the earlier miracles, since the miracle rod is referred to at times as the rod of Aaron, even when employed by Moses. See Exod. 7:9, 12, 15, 19; and 8:1. Thus, when in Exod. 17:5 God tells Moses to strike the rock with the same rod with which he struck the river, he is referring to a rod which in the story of the plagues is said to be Aaron's. For the identification of the rod in Num. 20 with that in Num. 17, see Rashbam, *Midrash Lekah Tov*, A. B. Ehrlich (*Mikra Kifshuto*), and Martin Noth (*Numbers*), *ad loc.*, as well as S. E. Loewenstamm, "Merivat Kadesh," *Encyclopaedia Biblica* 5 (1968), pp. 456-58.

25. The last possibility is expressly advocated by Rashbam, *ad loc.*

26. See Hahmanides, *ad loc.*; M. Margaliot, *op. cit.*, pp. 204-207; J. Milgrom, *op. cit.*, pp. 255-56.

27. See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: 1907), p. 40, meanings 6 and 8. Although the combination *dabber el* means "speak to" in the preponderance of cases, it can mean "speak concerning," as in 1 Sam. 3:12, Isa. 16:13, Jer. 30:4 (but never in the Torah). However, in such cases the meaning is "speak against" in a prophetic sense. I could find no Biblical examples of *dabber el* in the sense of speaking at or concerning a place.

28. See Exod. 14:13-14 (the Reed Sea), 16:6-8 (the manna), and Num. 16:28-30 (Korah and his company). However, these examples do not necessarily suggest, as Milgrom argues (*op. cit.*, pp. 255, 260), that at Kadesh the miracle would also have been preceded by such a statement. Note that Moses performs the similar miracle at Rephidim without prior explanation.

29. See Milgrom, *op. cit.*, pp. 262-64. Besides the example of Joshua, the use of prophetically initiated speech to effect miracles is best exemplified in the Elijah and Elisha stories: 1 Kgs. 17:1, 14, 21, 18:36-37; 2 Kgs. 1:10, 2:21, 3:16-17, 4:7.

30. We may recall that Moses begins his prophetic career by disclaiming an ability to speak to the people and Pharaoh on God's behalf (Exod. 4:10-17, 6:30-7:1). God simply assigns Aaron to be Moses' mouthpiece (or "prophet"). Moses takes verbal initiative in arguing before God for leniency in His judgment of Israel (Exod. 32:11-14, 31-32, 34:9; Num. 14:13-19, 21:7; Deut. 9:18-19, 25:29), but not in demonstrating God's providential power within Israelite society. For social models for the intermediary role of the Israelite prophet see Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: 1980).

31. It is interesting that Num. 12:7 uses the same verb for "trust" (*'mm*) when Moses is said by God to be "trusted (*ne'eman*) throughout My household." There we

are told that God speaks to him "mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles." In this regard Moses is unequalled among the prophets (Deut. 34:10). Yet in our passage Moses is not trusting enough of God to demonstrate before the people His providential presence through a verbal expression of his own.

32. See Isa. 8:13 and 29:23.

33. In rabbinic thought human sanctification of God (His name) is accomplished in three ways: in martyrdom, in supererogatory ethical conduct (especially in public toward non-Jews), and in prayer. I have been unable to locate a comprehensive treatment of this idea in rabbinic literature. See Norman Lamm, "Kiddush Ha-Shem and Hillul Ha-Shem," in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 10:977-981; and Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: 1979), pp. 108-109, 356-360, 629.

34. In Exod. 16:7, 17:6; Num. 14:10, and 16:19, God or His Glory is visibly present for the response to the people's complaints. Radak (David Kimhi), commenting on Ps. 106:32, goes so far as to suggest that Moses, in his words to the people in Num. 20:10, is stalling in the hope that the Divine Glory would yet appear as it had at Rephidim.

35. Since the rod had previously been Moses' instrument for the performance of miracles, the people (and the readers) may have expected that once again it would have that role. How surprised they would have been had Moses, with rod in hand, chosen instead to employ speech! Several commentators suggest that the people would have been more impressed had the rock responded to Moses' speech than to his rod. See Rashi and S. D. Luzzatto, *ad loc.*

36. For example, the human sanctification (*Kiddush*) of the Sabbath is accomplished through the recitation of two prescribed blessings, one for the day and one for wine, accompanied by drinking a prescribed amount of the wine. Prayers of sanctification of God in the synagogue (*Kedushah* and *Kaddish*) are accompanied by specific physical gestures, as is the ceremony of betrothal (*Kiddushin*).

37. For text-critical explanations of the relation of this final verse to what precedes it, see S. E. Loewenstamm, *op. cit.*, pp. 456-58; G. W. Coats, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-5; and M. Noth, *op. cit.*, p. 147. Regardless of how one explains this apparent incongruity text-critically, the ironic tension between this ending and the body of the story requires interpretation.

38. See Rashbam, *ad loc.* Loewenstamm, *op. cit.*, cites Ezekiel 20:41 and 28:25, where God is sanctified through His redemption of Israel.

39. See Rashi, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* and *Midrash Lekah Tov*, *ad loc.*

40. The idea that God is sanctified through His execution of justice is also expressed in Ezek. 28:22 and Isa. 5:16.

41. *Sifre Deut.* 349. According to rabbinic tradition, the deaths of Moses, Aaron and Miriam are connected with this single incident.

42. See note 30 above.

43. *Yelamdenu* in *Yalkut Shim'oni* 764.

44. See *Sanhedrin* 34a and *Shabbat* 88b.

45. See *Gen. Rabbah* 4:6, cited at the very opening of this essay. God pathetically anticipates Moses' failure of speech with a withholding of His own speech. Contrast *Sifre Num.* 137, cited in note 7 above.