**The Punishment of Moshe:  
Korach vs. Mei Meriva**

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In his discussion of the incident of Mei Meriva, Shadal writes: “Moshe Rabbeinu sinned one sin, and the commentaries piled upon him more than thirteen sins!” While there is no doubt that Moshe was forbidden to enter *Eretz Yisrael* as a result of the incident at Mei Meriva, the Torah so successfully conceals what actually went wrong that it is virtually impossible for even our greatest commentaries to come up with a workable theory that satisfactorily deals with every nuance in the verses that recount the story. In fact, so much ink has been spilled over what exactly Moshe did that most students can name several sins that our greatest leader may have committed. While this article may add a twist to the mass of answers, Shadal’s comment should remind us that Moshe’s harsh punishment was due to the overly exacting standard to which God held him, and not as a result of a multitude of errors that he committed.

No new theory can be advanced on this topic without an initial survey of what has already been proposed. However, as we will see presently, the verses leave us with so many conflicting impressions that each commentary can justifiably ask every other commentary why he ignored this word or another.

Rashi views the sin as being all about the missed opportunity to make a *kiddush Hashem* (“*le-hakdisheni*,” *Bemidbar* 20:12). Had Moshe and Aharon spoken to the rock instead of hitting it, the people would have realized that God controls all of nature and that all of nature is thus eager to do His bidding:

For had you spoken to the rock and it had given forth [water], I would have been sanctified before the very eyes of the people, who would have said, “If this rock, which does not speak and does not hear and has no need for sustenance fulfills the word of God, how much more so must we!” (Rashi, *Bemidbar* 20:12)

Rabbeinu Chananel, as cited by Ramban, also views the sin as a failure to glorify God, but he presents a different angle:

For the sin was in their saying, “Shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?” They should have said, “Shall God bring forth water?” (Ramban, *Bemidbar* 20:1)

According to Rabbeinu Chananel, the issue is not simply that Moshe (and by extension, Aharon) failed to exalt God, but that they in fact stole His thunder by arrogating to themselves the central role in the miracle.

For his part, Ramban does not view the failure to make a *kiddush Hashem* as the main failure in this incident, but it is not clear what he does think the major sin was:

And the truth is… they both agreed to hit the rock twice. (Ramban, ibid.)

What exactly does Ramban find objectionable in the actions of Moshe? It is true that the verse’s statement that Moshe hit the rock twice seems like an unnecessary detail that requires some explanation, but it appears difficult to justify elevating it to the level of the central transgression that led to Moshe and Aharon receiving the ultimate punishment.

Perhaps the view of Ramban is best explained through the prism of Rambam’s view:

And his sin was that he inclined to one of the extremes among the character traits, in the trait of patience; when he inclined towards anger when he declared, “Listen now, O rebels,” God punished him. (*Shemoneh Perakim*, ch. 4)

For Rambam, the issue was not a failure to direct the people towards God, but rather a failure on the part of Moshe to control his emotions. In Rambam’s view, this is exemplified by Moshe’s angry statement referring to the people as rebels. It is possible that in the view of Ramban, this is demonstrated best when Moshe not only hit the rock, but when he did so again.

Of all the views, perhaps the most intriguing – and most original and controversial – is that of Abarbanel. In his view, Moshe and Aharon did not really do anything wrong at Mei Meriva. Their deviations from God’s command were indeed minor and were not inherently deserving of such a harsh punishment. Why, then, were they severely chastised and punished?

And my view on this matter is that Moshe and Aharon were punished because of sins that they did – Aharon for the sin of the [golden] calf and Moshe our master in the matter of the spies. (Abarbanel, *Bemidbar* 20:1)

Abarbanel maintains that this entire incident was merely a cover-up for Moshe and Aharon. In reality, each one had already lost his opportunity to enter *Eretz Yisrael* as a result of his involvement in an earlier, far more significant sin – either the *eigel ha-zahav* or the *cheit ha-meraglim*. However, their roles in those incidents were clearly not as great as the main protagonists, and God wanted to allow them to save face by not punishing them along with the masses who were swept up in the excitement of the worship of the *eigel* or the desperation following the negative report of the spies. Thus, only at the end of the forty-year sojourn in the wilderness did God create a “set-up” so that they would fail in some way, which would allow Him to publicly justify denying them entry into *Eretz Yisrael*.

What is striking about all of these answers is not only that each one focuses mainly on one word or clause in the verses, without dealing with all of them, but also the fact that none of these commentaries, save perhaps Abarbanel, endeavor to explain why the punishment fit the crime. Moshe and Aharon had spent their entire careers focused on the goal of bringing the Jewish People into *Eretz Yisrael*, and now, at the very end of that mission, they were denied the opportunity to complete that mission as a result of a seemingly minor offense.

Furthermore, it should be noted that it is not clear that the apparent offense was all that bad. The people did not know that Moshe was supposed to speak to the rock; was not the fact that water was rushing from a rock, no matter how it was brought about, miraculous enough to create the potential for a *kiddush Hashem*? Did Moshe really miss the chance to focus the people religiously? Was Moshe’s anger here demonstrably worse than his offer to resign when the people demanded meat?

To answer these questions, we will have to broaden the lens through which we view this incident. We begin with some extremely overlooked verses that are virtually lost between the stories of Korach and Mei Meriva.

The people, having witnessed the deaths of Korach and his men, as well as the deaths of others in the ensuing plague, have reached a point of despair. They sense that perhaps God’s tent, previously thought to be a source of spiritual life for the nation, has now turned into the locus of physical death: “Anyone who comes close to God will die; are we doomed to die?” (*Bemidbar* 17:28). God seems to be on a rampage, and there does not appear to be any end in sight.

These words should be viewed as significant because they are the final words uttered by the generation that left Egypt. Chapters 18 and 19 focus on various laws (whose placement here will not concern us now), and when Chapter 20 opens, the story has shifted to the fortieth year, to the second generation. Why does the story of the first generation end so abruptly and on such a horrific note? Why is there no closure to the Korach story and its aftermath, and to the story of that generation as a whole? I believe that the answer to this question may help us better understand the Mei Meriva incident.

Many commentaries seek to understand the events surrounding Moshe’s hitting the rock by comparing them to the most obvious parallel in *Chumash*, the story of Masa U-Meriva (*Shemot* 17). However, I would like to suggest that the story of Korach includes some highly significant parallels to the Mei Meriva incident, and it may ultimately be more valuable in explaining why Moshe Rabbeinu is punished so severely – prevented from ever entering the land that was the focus of his entire career.

Note the preponderance of textual similarities between the story of Korach and the story of Mei Meriva:

## *In both cases, the words used to describe the initial gathering of the people are virtually identical:*

They gathered together against Moshe and against Aharon. (16:3)

They gathered together against Moshe and against Aharon. (20:2)

1. Similarly, Moshe’s (and Aharon’s) reactions are the same in both incidents:

Moshe heard and fell on his face. (16:4)

And they fell on their faces. (20:6)

1. God makes an appearance in both stories, again with the same words being used:

And the glory of God appeared. (17:7)

And the glory of God appeared to them. (20:6)

1. In both stories, the protesters invoke images of the land that they have not seen and can scarcely hope to ever see:

Moreover, you did not bring us to a land flowing with milk and honey. (16:14)

Not a place of seed, or fig, or grape, or pomegranate. (20:5)

Interestingly, not only do both complaints refer to well-known descriptions of *Eretz Yisrael*, but they refer to precisely those aspects of the land that the *meraglim* highlighted:

…and cut from there a vine with one cluster of *grapes*, and bore it on a double pole, and of the *pomegranates*and of the *figs*. (13:23)

…and indeed it flows with milk and honey. (13:27)

1. The climactic events in the stories are similar. In the story of Korach, the land splits open and the people are swallowed into it; at Mei Meriva, the rock splits open and water comes gushing out of it.
2. God told Moshe that he would be punished “because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me (*le-hakdisheni*)” (20:12). Moshe is chastised not for any specific action, but rather for failing to create a *kiddush Hashem*. Had Moshe done as God commanded him and spoken to the rock, he would have sanctified the name of God in the eyes of the people. Since he failed in that mission, he would have to be punished.

Compare this to the prevalence of the root *k-d-sh* in the Korach story (16:3, 5, 7; 17:2, 3). Korach claimed that his rebellion was all about “*kedusha*,” and Moshe’s counterargument was, “Then the man whom God will choose – he is the holy one” – only God can decide who is truly holy.

A closer look at the two incidents reveals an amazing thing –Moshe handled the two cases in opposite ways.

1. In the case of Korach, Moshe made a public speech announcing that the issue would be decided if God made a *beria*, a new creation – namely, the opening of the earth. Moshe made God the arbiter of the dispute, even though the rebellion was ostensibly a political putsch against Moshe and Aharon. By contrast, at Mei Meriva, Moshe says, “Shall *we bring* forth water for you from this rock” (20:10). Even though this miracle was all about God, Moshe made it seem to be about himself and Aharon.
2. In the case of Korach, Moshe addressed the rebels with the phrase “Hear now, O offspring of Levi” (16:8) – he tried to diffuse their anger by referring to them in a brotherly fashion. Since Korach was his cousin, Moshe sought to make this into nothing more than a family dispute, or at least an intra-tribal affair.[[1]](#footnote-1) On the other hand, when faced with a justifiably tired and thirsty nation at Mei Meriva, he yelled at them, “Hear now, O rebels!” (20:10), referring to the desperate nation as rebels.
3. Finally, Godinstructed Moshe to take along “*ha-mateh*,” “the staff,” when he went to speak to the rock (20:7). Although a casual reader might assume that this refers to the staff that Moshe had used since we first encountered him in *Shemot*, the versedescribes that he took the staff “from before God” (20:9), presumably meaning that it was in the *Mishkan*. Since it is unlikely that Moshe stored his personal staff there, this *mateh* appears to be the staff of Aharon, which had emerged victorious after the challenge described in the story of Korah, the staff that was supposed to be a “safekeeping, as a sign for rebellious ones” (17:25).[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the story of Korach, Moshe’s powers of leadership were at an all-time high. He took a situation that was at its root a political power struggle and infused it with an aura of the divine. He recognized that he was merely God’s stand-in among the people, and thus that any rebellion against him or Aharon was actually a rebellion against the wishes of God. By contrast, at Mei Meriva, where it should have been comparatively simple for Moshe to calm the people – after all, all they wanted was water! – Moshe instead trumped up charges of a nation overtaken by the spirit of revolt. The people came to Moshe thinking that God had abandoned them and left them to die of thirst, and Moshe treated them as if they were questioning *his* authority.

Assuming that this analysis is correct and that Moshe misjudged the people in the Mei Meriva incident, why should this result in the punishment that it does?

The answer may lie in the versesthat conclude the Korach story. As noted above, that story ends with *Bnei Yisrael* wailing that the *Mishkan Hashem* has become a source of death rather than life, and, as noted, that story ends as quickly as it begins, with the screams of the Jews cut off by the *sof pasuk*. If we are sensitive to the way in which the Torah is written, if we can see the poetry in the form and structure of the verses, then the verses leave the desperate screams of the people ringing in our ears for forty years. The last that we hear of the people who left Egypt are their cries of desperation and rebellion. Perhaps the Torah is written in this way to signal to us that Moshe had these same cries ringing in his ears for the duration of the people’s journey in the wilderness. The multiple rebellions inspired by Korach left such a deep impression on Moshe that when the people came forward with another complaint forty years later – a fairly legitimate complaint – Moshe misjudged the situation and treated them as if they were their parents’ generation.

As such, at Mei Meriva it was revealed that Moshe could no longer lead the Jewish People, as he had lost touch with who they were. He was punishing the sons for the sins of their fathers, and when a Jewish leader reaches such a level of disconnect with his followers, the time has come for a new leader. Thus, God told Moshe that his punishment would be, “You will not bring *this* congregation to the land” (20:12). He cannot bring *this* nation into the land, because he is not in touch with who they are, and the time has therefore come for Moshe to step down.

According to this perspective, the issue is not so much what sin Moshe committed, as the various *Rishonim* cited above discussed, but rather whether or not Moshe was still the right man for the job that he had been appointed to forty years earlier. While human beings often have a hard time displacing a legend, God understood that Moshe’s continued leadership would be more hindrance than help, and He thus meted out not a punishment, but a judgment – an end to Moshe’s illustrious career.

1. See Rashi, who attributes Korach’s bitterness to his being passed over for the *nesiut* of the family of Kehat. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. My thanks to R. Menachem Leibtag for noting this point. See his *shiur* on *Parashat Chukat* on [www.tanach.org](http://www.tanach.org) for a fuller exposition.

   A second moment concerning the staff of Aharon comes at the end of Chapter 17. After Aharon’s staff has flowered and virtually turned into a tree in full bloom overnight, we are told, “And they saw, and each one took his staff” (17:24). Everyone involved in the “staff test” simply took their sticks, which were still nothing more than sticks, and went home. We are not told that anyone had any reaction, that anyone marveled over what happened to Aharon’s staff, or that anyone responded to this miracle with a proclamation that God and Moshe have been correct all along. Rather, for the now dispirited nation, no display of Divine intervention could restore their instinctive faith in the man who took them out of Egypt. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)