

# ESSAYS FROM THE RASHI WEBSITE

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## WHAT WAS MOSES' SIN? WHY DID GOD NOT FORGIVE HIM? *RUSSELL JAY HENDEL*

**ABSTRACT:** When, in a well-known biblical narrative, the Jewish people complain about water, God, in response, requests Moses to speak to a rock upon which water will emerge. At the end of this narrative, God harshly tells Moses, “Since you did not believe in Me to sanctify in front of the Jewish people, you will not bring this nation to Israel?” In a later episode, Moses prays to forgiveness only to have God respond, “Enough! Do not speak to Me further about this.” Why? What happened? Why couldn’t prayer undo it? There are about 10 answers to what Moses’ sin was. A classic response to why Moses’ prayers were ineffective focuses on the fact that spiritual people have higher more exacting standards leading to God refusing to tolerate any more prayers. In this essay, we show that Moses’ sin was *ongoing* slander of the Jewish people. The punishment by God was not the reaction to a particular moment but to a series of repeating and offensive acts of slander which continued after Moses’ prayer. The slander made Moses unfit for leadership. The reason God did not tolerate further prayer for Moses was because Moses never repented; he continued with the slander after the severe punishment.

### BACKGROUND AND SETTING

During their journeys, the Jews complained several times about lack of food and water. On one such occasion, God responds by requesting from Moses, “Take your staff, gather the nation with Aaron your brother, speak to the rock, and it will give its water; I will take out water from the rock and quench the nation and its flock. (Nu08-20).” The text indicates Moses’ compliance. “Moses took the staff in the presence of God *as God commanded him*; Moses and Aaron congregated the nation facing the staff; he said to them, “Listen *razors*, can we get water from this rock? He lifted his hand, hit the rock twice with his staff, and much water came out sufficient for the nation and its flock to drink. (Nu20-09:12)”

God continues, rather abruptly: “God spoke to Moses and Aaron: Because you have not believed in me to sanctify Me in front of the Jewish people, because of this, you will not bring this nation to the land I promised them.” Why? What happened? As the *italic* text shows, Moses complied with God’s request.

The enigma of *what happened* is intensified by God’s refusal to let Moses pray for forgiveness. In a later passage, Moses prayed to be allowed to enter Israel (Dt03-23:25). Moses had in fact successfully reversed God’s decisions on several occasions through prayer. Yet here, God responds, ...“Enough!” “Do not speak further to me anymore about this matter (Dt03:26).” The question of *why* surfaces again.

### ATTEMPTED ANSWERS

There are about a dozen answers to this question found in the biblical commentaries.[1] Many of them have been refuted. We mention two popular ones.

**Hit versus speak:** Some commenters note that Moses hit the rock rather than, as God commanded, speak to the rock. But the Ramban points out that Moses on occasion modified God’s orders because of the situation, the most notable example being his destroying the stones on which were written the 10 commandments because the people worshipped idols. Thus, his modifying God’s commands were apparently part of his job and not something to be punished for.

**Temper:** Several commenters argue that Moses’ sin was his temper as evidenced by his words and his jeering style: *listen razors, can we obtain water from this rock?* It is true that Moses had the personality trait of losing one’s temper. But there is no biblical sin prohibiting losing one’s temper. While it is certainly an undesirable character trait, a point emphasized by the ethics’ movement (*moosar*), it, in and of itself, does not justify such a harsh punishment with an incapability of reversal through prayer. The correct perspective, also noted by Rashi, is that his temper led him to slander the Jews and it is this slander which is a severe biblical sin that justified the punishment. We shall therefore, in this essay, also examine Moses’ lack of important leadership skills which drove his frustration and caused him to lose his temper.

#### THIS ESSAY'S APPROACH

In this essay we adopt the approach presented by Rashi and Ibn Ezra that the primary sin of Moses was slander. This approach in no way belittles the emphasis on Moses' temper since anger and temper can *lead* to slander. But the main sin of Moses was slander. Just to be clear: slander is a biblical sin while temper is a laudable personality trait. Moreover, this sin was not a one-time event. It was ongoing through his career. Hence, we emphasize that the reason God refused to *discuss* forgiveness with him is because Moses did not even attempt to repent and continued the sin. In the rest of the essay, we shall examine 4-6 passages where Moses committed the sin of slander. We shall also touch on leadership theory and show that Moses lacked the proper prerequisites to being a leader.

#### THE JEWS WILL NOT BELIEVE ME

When God first revealed himself to Moses and asked him to lead the Jewish people, he promised him that, "Upon going to the elders and saying that God appeared to me" that "they would believe him" (Ex03-16:18). Moses however responds to God's request, "But they won't believe me; for they will say, 'God did not appear to you'" (Ex04-01), directly contradicting what God had promised him.[2]

The commenters are unanimous that Moses spoke improperly. Rashi, in his commentary, walks us through the two signs that God gave Moses as well as the inuendo God made to him, each of which blames him for the sin of slandering the Jewish people by asserting they will not believe him.

- God directed Moses to throw his stick to the ground, whereupon it became a snake, which as Rashi explains is a biblical symbol of a slanderer (Ex04-03a). [3]
- God directed Moses to insert his hand in his bosom, whereupon it became leprous white, which as Rashi explains is a biblical symbol of slander (Ex04-06a). [4]
- Although normally reading a text as containing an inuendo might be something the reader reads into the text, if, as in this case, the context justifies it, we can take the inuendo as Author intended similar to the use of inuendoes by modern authors. When God referred to Moses staff which he held in his hand, God said "What is this (*mah zeh*) in your hand." In the biblical Hebrew *mah zeh* is misspelled as one-word *mizeh*, *from this*. Rashi explains that the misspelled word inuendoes the pun *from this (the staff) on your hand (you deserve to be smitten with lashes, lashes being the punishment for violating biblical prohibitions)*. Technically, inferring an inuendo from a misspelling is known as a *metaplasmus* and is a standard tool of authors. [5]

#### THE JEWS ARE ABOUT TO STONE ME

On a later occasion, when the Jews complained about lack of adequate water in the desert, Moses comes to God and states, "What should I do for this nation; there are about to stone me" (Ex17-04). *In context*, we have another example of slander by Moses. God's response (Ex17-05) is "Go before the nation and take the elders with you" which as Rashi explains, "Let's see if they stone you; why have you slandered My children" (Ex17-05a). Moreover, take the very elders which you said wouldn't believe you and, "Let them be witnesses that the water from the rock came from your actions on it; there were no previous hidden fountains" (Ex17-05b).

#### THE JEWS ARE LIKE INFANTS

Although the main theme of this essay is the slander Moses spoke, his lack of leadership skills is important and was one cause of his slander problem. [6] The earliest evidence of Moses lacking leadership skills occurs in Ex19.[7] Moses' father-in-law expresses his surprise to find Moses personally dealing with all disputes seeking resolution. His father-in-law suggests a delegation approach where Moses is the lead judge but has a team of judges working under him who resolve routine conflicts leaving the more difficult cases for Moses. His father-in-law quickly grasps that such a change needs God's approval and urges Moses to consult with God for such approval.

In Nu10 and Nu11 we find a similar episode. Moses voices frustration with dealing with the nation's complaints. In a key passage, Moses compares the Jews to infants, a point we will return to momentarily: *Was I pregnant with this nation?*

*Did I give birth to it? Why then have you spoken to me to bear them in my bosom, the way a nursemaid bears an infant, till the land that You swore to the patriarchal ancestors.* In response, God suggests a delegation solution: Moses will pick 70 outstanding leaders from the nation and God will confer his prophetic spirit on them in order to assist Moses in his work.

We noted that Moses compared the nation to an infant. To critique this, we recall the Hersey-Blanchard situational leadership model, a leadership model that has gained popularity precisely because it recognizes the potential for growth in subordinates [8] According to this model, every leadership-subordinate situation can start with a mentorship stage in which the subordinate is clueless and ignorant and is mentored almost every step of the way by the leader. When however the subordinate begins to grasp basic principles, the relationship enters the coaching stage, where the leader has to only remind the subordinate of basic principle, that is, coach the subordinate. When the subordinate masters the tasks he is assigned to and does not need coaching, the relationship enters the collaborative stage where the leader and subordinate work together to do projects. This eventually leads to the final delegation stage, where the subordinate has achieved complete mastery resulting in the leader being able to delegate his responsibilities to the newly trained subordinate.

This leadership style is fully consistent with the symbolism of the Temple candelabra: Aaron is told to light the candelabra until “the flame holds by itself” without further need of lighting. This is symbolic of the self-sufficiency encountered in the terminal stages of the Hersey-Blanchard model. The candelabra with its light symbolizes knowledge. The lighting of the candelabra symbolizes transferring light or knowledge, that is, teaching. The goal of the teacher is to enable self-sufficiency for the student, who should be able to show light or knowledge without further lighting transfer by the teacher.

Therefore, the analogy of *infant* is inappropriate to a leadership-subordinate relationship. More appropriate would be *child* or *teenager*, since *children and teenagers* are perceived as growing and becoming self-sufficient while this will take a long time in the infant.

We examined Moses’ lack of leadership since, as shown in this example, it significantly contributed to his frustrations which in turn drove his anger which resulted in slander.

#### WHEN DID THE ROCK INCIDENT HAPPEN

The essay began with a review of the incident of the rock, as a result of which Moses was severely punished. We first ascertain when this happened during the 40-year journey of the Jews in the desert. The timing of the incident is important in understanding God’s anger at Moses’ slander.

The incident of the rock opens with a verse indicating location and time: *The Jewish people, the entire congregation came to the Tzin wilderness in the first month and camped at Kadesh...*(Nu20-01). On the words *the entire congregation* Rashi comments, *the complete congregation: the deaths from the sin of the spies (wherein the original nation leaving Egypt died out over a 40-year period because of the sin of accepting the slander of the spies) had been completed.*

Rashi does not indicate *how* he arrived at this comment. In an interesting passage, Ramban erroneously argues that Rashi inferred this from the textual cue *entire congregation* with an apparent emphasis on *entire*, that is, *the entire* congregation with none missing. Ramban, then criticizes this alleged derivation of Rashi by showing that the phrase *entire congregation* occurs frequently in the biblical text without any special emphasis on the word *entire*.

In this essay, we argue that Rashi derived his comment using the **cross-reference** exegetical method. Nu20-01 identifies the location of the Jews in Kadesh in the Tzin dessert. The punishment of Moses and Aaron was announced there as a result of the sin of the rock which we still have not clarified. The following table cross-referencing Nu33 clarifies Rashi’s logic.

Biblical narrative in Nu20	Cross referenced narrative in Nu33
Jews arrive at Kadesh, in Tzin Desert in month 1 (Nu20-01)	Jews arrive at Kadesh in the Tzin desert (Nu33-36)
Jews on the border of Edom (Nu20-16)	They journey to Hor Hahar on the border of Edom (Nu33-37)
From Kadesh they journey to Hor Hahar where Aaron dies because of the sin by the rock in Kadesh (Nu20-22)	Aaron dies in <i>Hor Hahar</i> on day 1 of month 5 of the <u>40<sup>th</sup> year of their journeys</u> (Nu33-38)

Table 1: Cross reference of Nu20 by Nu33 showing that Nu20 happened in the 40<sup>th</sup> year.

As can be seen in the table, Aaron died in the 40<sup>th</sup> year of the 40-year period of the Jews in the desert. He died in month 5 after the incident of the rock which happened in month 1. But if the incident of the rock happened in the 40<sup>th</sup> year, then the deaths from the sin of the spies had ended. In other words, Rashi's conclusion, *The entire complete congregation came to Kadesh since the deaths from the sin of spies had stopped* is not based on the nuances of the word *entire* but rather based on the explicit cross reference to another biblical text.

An additional support to this may be found in Nu20-03 where the Jews state, *if only we had died in the death of our fellow Jews* apparently referring to the deaths of the original nation that came out of Egypt because of sin of the spies.

#### SLANDER: THE SIN OF THE INCIDENT OF THE ROCK

We are now in a position to identify the sin of the incident of the rock. It was the 40<sup>th</sup> year of their journeys. The original cohort of people leaving Egypt had died during the 40 years and the Jewish nation consisted of their descendants. These descendants did not have a history of excessive complaining. Rather they brought to Moses' attention that they lacked water. While it is true that they were afraid of dying of thirst, this is normal when one lacks water.

God, in response to the people's complaint, asks Moses to speak to the rock from which water would come. Moses tells the Jewish people as follows: *Please listen razors! Can we obtain water from this rock?* By using the word razors to describe the Jewish people as a nation of complainers with biting complaints like razors, Moses performed the sin of slander. Moreover, the current nation did not have a history of complaining that would justify Moses attacking them. It was their parents that constantly complained and they had died out because of the sin of the spies. So, Moses is slandering innocent people as *razors*.

This sin of slander builds upon Moses' previous sins of slander. While it may have been driven by his anger and frustration arising from his leadership style, the main sin was slander, and it was a slander of a new innocent generation. Moreover, it was done publicly unlike Moses' previous slanders which were done in a private dialogue between him and God. It was this public sin of slander for which God punished him.

#### WHY DIDN'T GOD FORGIVE HIM

The sin of slander enables us to understand the otherwise cryptic passage in Dt03-26 where God tells Moses to stop praying for forgiveness and asks Moses not to bring the subject of his sin up again. The reason for this is not necessarily because God judged Moses by a higher standard. Rather the reason is because *Moses continued to slander the Jewish people*. For example, Moses in his farewell speech addressed to the Jews prior to their entry into Israel (Dt09-01), numerous times accuses the descendants of those who left Egypt of *being stiff-necked, angering God, constantly rebelling* (Dt09-06:08); Moses should have alternatively said, *Remember how your fathers were a stiff-necked people, continuously angering God, and constantly rebelling.* In other words, Moses did not attempt to repent and *then* ask God for forgiveness; he rather asked God for forgiveness without any mention of his problem. God's response, "Enough; do not talk to Me anymore about this (Dt03-26)," is indeed the most logical and also the most just response.

#### CONCLUSION

This essay has examined the sin of Moses by the rock, a sin which received the harsh punishment of depriving him of further leadership and entry into the promised land. We have suggested that the core sin was *slander*. Moreover, this was not a one-time sin but an ongoing sin that started 40 years earlier. Moses never acknowledged this sin; nor did he seek to repent from it which is why he couldn't obtain God's forgiveness. His sin of slander was driven by the personality trait of a hot temper which was fueled by his inability to delegate to subordinates and his lack of interest in training them (Rashi, Dt03-26b).

#### NOTES

[1] Jacob Milgrom, *The Jewish Publication Society (JPS) Torah Commentary: Numbers, Excursus 50*, Varda Books, 2004.

[2] Ex04-01, Ibn Ezra.

[3] The snake is a biblical symbol for slander for several reasons; (i) In Gn03 the snake slanders God to Adam and Eve resulting in their eating from the fruit forbidden to them; (ii) the strength of the snake, unlike lions, tigers, or other animals, lies in the venom injected from its bite; this highly resembles the slanderer who causes damage by speech with the mouth; (iii) Several biblical verses such as Ec10-11 connect the snake with slander.

[4] The establishment of leprosy as the punishment and hence the symbol of slander is created by linking the two at Dt24-08:09 and additionally by the story of Miryam, Nu12, wherein her slander of Moses was punished by leprosy.

[5] Russell Jay Hendel, *The Dynamics of Peshat and Derash in Rashi*, Doctoral thesis, Spertus Institute, 2020-2021, Dean Bell supervisor, Chapter 5, Accessible at <http://www.Rashiyomi.com/Rashibook.htm>

[6] Russell Jay Hendel, *Negative Leadership*, **The Stepping Stone**, June 2025, accessible at <https://www.soa.org/sections/leadership-development/leadership-development-newsletter/2025/june/ss-2025-06-hendel/>

[7] This insight was provided to me by my brother.

[8] Paul Hershey, *The Situational Leader*, Upper Saddle, NJ: Prentice Hall & IBD, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, 1986; Ken Blanchard, Patricia Zigarmi, and Drea Zigarmi, *Leadership and the One Minute Manager: Increasing Effectiveness Through Situational Leadership II*, New York: William Morrow (Harper Collins), 2013.