

OUR MOST GRIEVOUS SIN

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We read in the Torah, Numbers 20:12, that God tells Moses he is not to go into the Promised Land. This dumbfounding irony follows Miriam's death, when the people had no water to drink, because Moses struck the rock to bring forth water, instead of speaking to it as God directed him.

It brings to mind the idea of "sin," which often seems to modern, forward-thinking, secularly educated Jews as retrograde, a throwback to an ancient time of religious ignorance and superstition.

Modern thinking, however, including that of many Jews, in this and other religious matters, unfortunately is dominated by Christian concepts and practices, which frequently are antithetical to those of Torah and Judaism. Protestants teach that sin, including original sin, extinguishes human capacity to be at one with God, *except* by God's rescue of the sinner—salvation is by *faith* and by *grace*—at God's initiative. Roman Catholics typically teach that humans can reach towards God for redemption, but only because of the sacrifice Jesus made for them.

The essence of the Jewish view of sin, however, is that each of us has the wherewithal of free will to choose directly or indirectly to go off the path of righteousness, thereby missing the mark and bringing grief to ourselves and others—and we may in turn chose to return to that path.

Thinking about Moses' life in this context, in relation to his sin, what he had done and the extraordinary consequence he suffered, it occurred to us that the essence of his lapse, or misstep from the path, was that he *took the creation for granted*, treating it as a static phenomenon. He failed for an instant to appreciate that God is continually masterminding the creation, that the creation is a constant process, and that its wonders can emerge for us at any moment if we chose to put ourselves in

the right place at the right time, or if we chose to avoid being in the wrong place at the wrong time. And this misstep had potentially devastating consequences for the faith and hope of the people.

Moses apparently felt that more than God's masterminding was necessary for the flow of water to begin at that particular moment, that it was necessary for him to strike the rock. And in that action, he implicitly took the creation for granted, because he rejected God's assurance that the water would flow when he spoke to the rock.

What, more precisely, is the creation that *we* shouldn't take for granted? An easier question to answer would be: What within our view is *not* a part of the divine creation, and thus may be taken for granted?

Certainly we should not take for granted those who are most dear to us. Certainly we should not take ourselves for granted.

We concluded that, like Moses, if we want to avoid dying in the wilderness, denied entry into the promised land of this life, we must stay on the path of righteousness, continually appreciating the divine in all of creation, not taking it for granted.

But how do we begin to ensure that outcome?

By not taking *ourselves* for granted, by not treating ourselves as something other than the moment-to-moment creation of God, with the infinite capacity to live in God's image.

It requires an ongoing commitment to integrate into our lives the practices, symbols and rituals that enable us always to strive to remain on the path—actively committed to righteousness, truthfulness, and justice, freedom, peace, and kindness—instead of unconsciously acting as if these ideals uphold themselves, leaving us permanently free to do what makes us comfortable or satisfies our urges at any moment.

To say that such an extraordinary commitment is required begs the obvious question: How are we, each of us alone as individuals, to maintain such a commitment, given our pressures and disappointments, which can drain our energy and dissipate our spirit?

Torah and Judaism neither contemplate nor counsel that, as isolated individuals, we are to uplift ourselves in the image of God, that alone we are to recognize God's masterminding of creation and continually align ourselves with it. On the contrary, we have been commanded for our own good to act as members of a family, a kehilla, and a people, whether in prayer or the communal life that

precedes and follows it. Our tradition has taught us that the most efficient and effective way to remain on the path of righteousness is through active participation in a congregational community, having the support of many others who are pursuing the same path, and giving them support in return.

We concluded to our surprise that, like Moses, our most grievous sin—that which causes the most grief to us and those we care about—is taking the creation for granted. But *not* surprising to us was the realization that the most effective antidote to taking the creation for granted is our own committed participation in and strengthening of a congregational community.

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