

## How Things End

Roald Hoffmann

Oh, there must be an end – to life, to wandering in the desert, to a term of office. And with the ending, questions insinuate themselves: Why now? When I have so much to do? And...Could I have done better? Why?

In the synagogue, Jews approach the yearlong reading of the end of the Torah, the last chapters of Deuteronomy. Forty years in the desert the people have wandered, led by Moses. Desperate after water, deluded by idols, the people wavered. Even as they lived in the age of miracles, the power of God plain before their eyes!

Moses did not waver, he led them with upraised hand and a clear mind. And yet here is how God spoke to Moses.

“You shall die on the mountain that you are about to ascend, and shall be gathered to your kin, as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his kin; for you broke faith with Me among the Israelite people at the waters of Meribah-Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, by failing to uphold My sanctity among the Israelite people.”  
[Deuteronomy 32:50-51]

And God took Moses to Mount Nebo, and from there he saw the land, bountiful, resplendent. And there, in sight of the promised land, Moses died.

Why? Well, at Meribah, the people complained, nothing new about that:

“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.” ...”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.”...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...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 I have given them.” [Numbers 20:5-12]

But what exactly was the great sin which the strength of the Israelites, their leader, committed at Meribah? What could merit that he should not reach where he, and only he, could clearly see? ‘Tis a

puzzlement,' a question that has bothered many over the ages. Maimonides, the great Jewish rationalist thinker, saw the sin in Moses' clear anger at the people -- for God had not been overtly angry in telling Moses how to respond to the complaints of His people. Nachmanides, the mystical other pole of Jewish learning in medieval Spain, saw Moses' fatal mistake in his saying "We", and not "God," as if the miracle were of his and Aaron's own magic.

Here is how a lesser American poet reacted to it, faced with a striking painting of a burned mountainside, and with a great French writer, Michel Tournier, writing of Moses :

#### IN VIEW OF THE PROMISED LAND

The night before he died,  
Moses our teacher dreamt

of the waters that once split  
for him, now washing over

the burning bush on Horeb; Moses  
woke, and smiled at his fate,

to lead a kvetching folk  
from oasis to water hole; he,

drawn from water, giving  
himself to fire, chosen

for expertise in the miracles  
of aquifers and desalination!

Moses found it – again and  
again – from the bitter waters

of Marah to the wilderness  
of Zin; tired, there at Meribah,

he struck the rock twice, did not  
speak to it, as was commanded,

as if to say, God, another miracle!  
At Meribah Moses gave up

on his people; for this defiance  
he would not enter the land

of milk and honey. They  
say we do not know where

God buried Moses, having killed  
him with a kiss. I know.

In every green mountain that  
catches fire, in the yellow-red

night wounds of that fire,  
on the day after, in black

that sucks light from the slopes  
– there is Moses. The mistral

then comes, and blows the ashes  
up in a cloud that exiles

day from the valley. In  
the slopes is where Moses lies.

And drinks – rains, phase  
of birth. The mountainside

grows green, as it must. And  
Moshe rabbenu smiles (as

the priests did not let him  
in his book), now at peace

with his fire and his water.

As things end, we are always unsure of the value of what we have done. We could have spoken more gently to our children, put in more time into that introductory chemistry lecture, we could have somehow gotten a just health care plan through a recalcitrant Congress.

What was Moses' failure at Meribah-Kadesh? A small one, but oh so important. Faced with the disbelief of the people, Moses struck the

rock twice, in anger. He had lost faith in the people of Israel, his own people.

What matters in this beautiful and terrible world is not that we reach the end. What matters is that one tried. And, yes, that one has faith in the people, those obstinate people. Moses faltered at Meribah, yet the people of Israel were hardly lost. For Moses, the same Moses who had been so angry at them, had done well for the people. The Torah draws to a close, but the land lies before them.

How do things end? With a beginning.