

Moses' Leadership Struggles

In Numbers 27, the Israelites are close to entering the promised land. God prepares Moses for his death, reminding him that he is not to enter the land, with reference to an upsetting incident that occurred at the waters of Meribath-kadesh (see Num. 20:1-13). Here, with the help of Jewish interpreters, we explore the question of why Moses was excluded from the promised land.

The Lord said to Moses, "Go up this mountain of the Abarim range, and see the land that I have given to the Israelites. When you have seen it, you shall be gathered to your people as your brother Aaron was [i.e., you shall die], because you rebelled against my word in the wilderness of Zin when the congregation quarrelled with me. You did not show my holiness before their eyes at the waters. (Numbers 27:12-14)

Was Moses' sin at the waters of Meribath-kadesh really so bad? Yes, we know that he lost patience with the people and struck the rock twice instead of once... but does the punishment really fit the crime? Over centuries of reflection, Torah commentators have offered diverse explanations. Review this incident in 20:1-13. Ponder the character of Moses, his past track record of leadership (e.g., at the Red Sea), the expectations of the people and the desperation of their drought-stricken situation.

Then, let's follow the lead of a contemporary commentator, Mosheh Lichtenstein.¹

Lichtenstein directs our attention to three Torah verses (Num.20:12; 27:14; Deut. 32:51). Each makes an association between the events at Meribath-kadesh and Moses' inability to bring about a *Kiddush Hashem*, i.e., a sanctification of God's name. For instance, Num.20:12 reads:

"Because you did not...show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites."

In other words, Moses' actions at Meribath-kadesh do not result in God's holiness being shown forth to the people. Reflect on the three verses mentioned above.

Lichtenstein argues that the events at Meribath-kadesh signal the essence of a far greater problem

that plays out through the rebellion stories that consume so much of Numbers. The problem is a developing chasm between Moses as original leader of the exodus and the new generation born in the wilderness. In this view, the striking of the rock is not the issue that prevents Moses from entering the land. (Traditional commentators Rashbam and Ibn Ezra suggest that his 'sin' was not wicked defiance but a simple case of human failure.) What is really at stake is the growing alienation between Moses and his people.

There is no doubt that Moses is a great leader and prophet. Yet, for whatever reason, his leadership and communication skills are not working for this new breed of Israelite. He has lost his rapport with the people, unable to provide the guidance they need. As a result (and this is the critical point) *God's Name is not being sanctified*. The people require a different leader to take them through the next stage of Israel's journey. The chosen leader is Joshua. He is the one to take the Israelites into the promised land.

One might argue that, even if 'stood down' as leader, could not God have allowed Moses to enter the land as a private citizen? How do you respond? Note: In the Midrash Moses pleads to be permitted to enter as a simple Jew who would now be able to perform the *Mitzvot Hateluyot Ba'Aretz* (i.e., those commands which apply uniquely to those who dwell in the land of Israel).

Reflection

Stepping down from a leading role can be as challenging as stepping up to leadership. It is an issue for parents as much as politicians, for popes as much as CEOs. What insights might we glean from our Torah text to stimulate a discussion on leadership: its requirements, its development, its closure?

1. See Mosheh Lichtenstein, *Moses: Envoy of God, Envoy of his people* (NJ: KTAV, 2008). Scripture: NRSV.

© Teresa Pirola, 2013. lightoftorah.net
Non-commercial reproduction permitted with acknowledgement of website.