

Moses Prepares to Die

In Numbers 27:12-23 God takes Moses up the mountain on the east side of the Jordan, overlooking the land into which his people will enter. There Moses is told of his approaching death, reminded of his exclusion from the Promised Land, and told to arrange for leadership succession through the person of Joshua.

God: "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 [i.e. you shall die]" (27:12).

Moses: "Let the Lord appoint someone...so that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd" (27:17).

The God-Moses interaction on the mountain-top, with the Promised Land in sight, is filled with pathos. Read it carefully. What thoughts and emotions might Moses have at this moment?

It appears that Moses is the epitome of selflessness, his only concern being that his people not be left leaderless. Are you convinced? Are you surprised that Moses holds no sense of personal grievance, despite being excluded from the Promised Land? The Jewish sages of old were not so convinced! Reading between the lines of Scripture, they told stories (midrash) about Moses' human struggle at this critical point. Moses, they said, remembered that long ago God had called him to a mission which he undertook only with great reluctance (see Exodus 3-4). And now, God prevents him from completing his mission! The midrash compares Moses to a young woman relentlessly pursued by a great king for her hand in marriage, only to be divorced by the king later. Moses is understandably indignant at such treatment! Yet he manages to accept the situation, asking only that God not treat his successor the same way.

Other issues bothered Moses too, according to the midrash; like the fact that Joshua rather than

his own sons, would succeed him. Here the sages note that the passage immediately follows the story of the five sisters who negotiate new legislation allowing them to inherit their father's property (27:1-11). "If daughters inherit, it is surely right that my sons inherit my glory," reasons Moses (Midrash Rabbah 21, 24). Instead, he faces the lesson that "Anyone who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit" (Prov. 27:18). Joshua is the one with the track record of faithful service and who displays the character of a faithful shepherd. The mantle of leadership passes to him.

Jewish tradition, then, holds within it the view that Moses' acceptance of God's will was not automatic; he had to wrestle with his own personal issues. But that he did, and in Moses' struggle the tradition sees more evidence of his integrity as a true servant of God and shepherd of Israel. When it comes to the appointment of Joshua, "[Moses] laid his hands on him and commissioned him" (27:23). He lays not one hand (as God had instructed in 27:18), but both hands. This, say the Jewish sages, indicates that Moses blessed Joshua with abundance and unreserved generosity of heart.

Reflection:

Reflect on a time when what God was asking of you seemed unfair, perhaps harsh and uncalled for, yet you managed to 'work through' your personal grievance to a place of inner peace and acceptance.

How can we teach our children to face these difficult passages in life? •

Sources: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Woman's Commentary* (New York, 2008); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (New York, n.p.d.); *Midrash Rabbah: Numbers Vol.2* (London/New York: Soncino, 1983). Scripture: NRSV.

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