

Parashat Chukkat
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Goodbye To A Leader

Once again the Israelites challenge God and Moses. Previously they complained about the lack of meat, and God sent them meat and they ate until they became ill. Last week all the spies but Joshua and Caleb bring back an evil report on the land of Canaan. The people continue to be dissatisfied and in a fearful place. Now the people are distraught because of the lack of water. The journey through the desert was obviously very difficult, physically and emotionally. To leave one's home, even if it is a terrible place, is traumatic. Refugees face profound problems and challenging adjustments. We should have a great deal of empathy for their plight.

One major difference in this situation is that they have a great leader in Moses who is able to access God, and throughout their journey God responds to their needs. One might assume they would have come to trust both Moses and God. I suspect that the story, as we have it, leaves out some of the complications. Most of the time we know that Moses seems to be a fully competent and inspiring leader, but we do not know that he has a tendency to take on too much and not to be good at delegating. We remember that his father-in-law Jethro, who is the world's first management consultant, tried to help with time management and delegating. Jethro was concerned about burnout.

God, too, while a seemingly reliable partner, often become impatient with the complaints and rebellions, and threatens to end his relationship with the Israelites. Moses' responsibility is to keep the Israelites in line, and to calm God's fiery temper. In this week's portion, God responds to the people's need for water by telling Moses, "You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts." (Num.20:8) The instructions are clear and straightforward. Take the rod and tell the rock to produce water. However, Moses is angry and I believe also very weary. Leading the Jewish people is always a difficult task. So he takes the rod and assembles the people and in exasperation he thunders, "Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?"(Num.20:9) and he strikes the rock and water gushes forth. God is now very angry and He says, "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 that I have given them." (Num. 20:12). Moses and Aaron are told at that moment that they will not be permitted to enter the land of Canaan as punishment for their failure to trust they would provide water by their only speaking to the rock. By striking the rock, Moses leaves it unclear who is the source of the water. The conclusion that the people could easily draw is that Moses knew where there was water and simply with his physical strength and his magic rod released the water. By commanding the rock, there could have been no doubt that the water was supplied by God.

For millennia, Jews have debated whether the punishment fits the crime. Why should Moses and Aaron be deprived of the pleasure of completing their work? Did they not serve God well all these years? Sure they were not perfect, but we do not expect perfection. The difference in this case seems first of all to be Moses' insulting the people by calling them rebels. Moses is just about at the end of his tether. He was the one to lead them out of Egypt and through the desert, but he does not have the strength or the skill to lead them in the next phase when they enter the Land. Second, it seems that Moses is losing his ability to listen carefully to God's instructions. The Torah teaches us that leaders are not forever. A leader who takes us through one phase of our existence comes to a point where it is time for new leadership. How do we communicate the need for a change? It is difficult for the leader to step down from her/his position. Some leaders are fortunate enough to know when it is time to relinquish the reins, and others will need help in deciding to leave. In our society, the way we help leaders step down is harsh and uncaring. When a community or an organization finds that it is necessary for a change, it is important to acknowledge the leaders accomplishments and to offer him/her honor and dignity.

The Midrashim, on the death of Moses, tells us how much Moses struggled with the knowledge that he would not enter the land of Canaan. He begged, pleaded and argued with God. He was jealous of Joshua. Finally, God shows him the Land and tells Moses that he should not understand his inability to enter the Land as punishment but as the natural consequence of his being human. No person ever truly gets to finish his/her work. The next generation will have to take over where he/she left off. This is what it means to be human. In one of the most beautiful and poignant passages in the Midrash, when it is finally time for Moses to die, God does not send the Angel of Death but God takes Moses' soul with a kiss. In the end everything Moses has tried to do for God and the Jewish people is acknowledged and appreciated in this intimate and loving act. How we welcome new leaders is important, but equally, if not more important, is how we say goodbye.