

KOL MEVASSER

Leadership and the People

Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

The sedra of Shemot, in a series of finely etched vignettes, paints a portrait of the life of Moses, culminating in the moment at which G-d appears to him in the bush that burns without being consumed. It is a key text of the Torah view of leadership, and every detail is significant.

I want here to focus on just one passage in the long dialogue in which G-d summons Moses to undertake the mission of leading the Israelites to freedom – a challenge which, no less than four times, Moses declines. I am unworthy, he says. I am not a man of words. Send someone else. It is the second refusal, however, which attracted special attention from the sages and led them to formulate one of their most radical interpretations. The Torah states:

Moses replied: "But they will not believe me. They will not listen to me. They will say, 'G-d did not appear to you'." (4:1)

The sages, ultra-sensitive to nuances in the text, evidently noticed three strange features of this response. The first is that G-d had already told Moses, "They will listen to you" (3:18). Moses' reply seems to contradict G-d's prior assurance. To be sure, the commentators offered various harmonizing interpretations. Ibn Ezra suggests that G-d had told Moses that the elders would listen to him, whereas Moses

expressed doubts about the mass of the people. Ramban says that Moses did not doubt that they would believe initially, but he thought that they would lose faith as soon as they saw that Pharaoh would not let them go. There are other explanations, but the fact remains that Moses was not satisfied by G-d's assurance. His own experience of the fickleness of the people (one of them, years earlier, had already said, "Who made you ruler and judge over us?") made him doubt that they would be easy to lead.

The second anomaly is in the signs that G-d gave Moses to authenticate his mission. The first (the staff that turns into a snake) and third (the water that turned into blood) reappear later in the story. They are signs that Moses and Aaron perform not only for the Israelites but also for the Egyptians. The second, however, does not reappear. G-d tells Moses to put his hand in his cloak. When he takes it out he sees that it has become "leprous as snow". What is the significance of this particular sign? The sages recalled that later, Miriam was punished with leprosy for speaking negatively about Moses (Bamidbar 12:10). In general they understood leprosy as a punishment for lashon hara, derogatory speech. Had Moses, perhaps, been guilty of the same sin?

The third detail is that, whereas Moses' other refusals focused on his own sense of inadequacy, here he speaks not about himself but about the people. They will not believe him. Putting these three points together, the sages arrived at the following comment:

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KJ Schedule

Friday, January 4, 2013

Shaharit/Morning Prayer	6:30 am
Shir Hashirim	4:25 pm
Shabbat Candle Lighting	4:39 pm
Minhah/Arbith	4:39 pm

Shabbat Shemot

Saturday, January 5, 2013

Shaharit/Morning Prayer	8:30 am
Ladies Tehillim Group	after kiddush
Minha, Seudah Shlisheet, Arvit	4:00 pm
Motzei Shabbat / Havdallah	5:25 pm

Weekdays

Sunday, January 6, 2013

Shaharit	7:30 am
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Monday to Friday, January 7-11, 2013

Shaharit	6:30 am
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Monday, January 7, 2013

Women's Tehillim at KJ Library	10:30 am
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Erev Shabbat

Friday, January 11, 2013

Shaharit/Morning Prayer	6:30 am
Shir Hashirim	4:30 pm
Shabbat Candle Lighting	4:45 pm
Minhah/Arbith	4:45 pm



KJ YOUTH CHOIR

Directed by Rabbi Hagay Batzri
Sunday, January 13th@11 am

Shabbat Kiddush

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SHABBAT READINGS

Torah 206 to 224 , Haftara 229 to 231

Kahal Joseph Congregation

Rabbi Hagay Batzri • 310.474.0559
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In Memoriam

We remember these yearzeit anniversaries for January 5 to 12, 2013. It is customary to light a memorial candle, donate tzedaka, and attend services the preceding Shabbat.

23 Tevet / Shabbat, January 5th

Kovkah Cohen *Kovkah bat Yaacov*

Hannah Dallal

Pinchas Khalili *Pinbas ben Nissan*

Emma Moses *Amuma bat Farha*

24 Tevet / Sunday, January 6th

Moses Abraham *Moshe Hai ben Avraham*

Louise Jacob

Sulman Sheeri *Sulman ben Yosef*

Shather Shokri *Shather ben Yaacov*

26 Tevet / Tuesday, January 8th

Ronnie Assia *Ronnie ben Naji*

27 Tevet / Wednesday, January 9th

Sassoon Elias

Stanley Feinberg *Stanley ben Jesse*

28 Tevet / Thursday, January 10th

Aziza Solomon *Aziza bat Amam*

Maurice Zekaria *Moshe ben Seon*

1 Shevat / Shabbat, January 12th

Mozelle Solomon *Mozly bat Haviva*

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We have magnificent, limited edition handcrafted artwork for sale created by our member, Jaleh Partiyeli. Menorahs, chargers, serving platters and plates hand decorated and designed especially for Kahal Joseph, are available for purchase. These beautiful art objects make a wonderful gift and an addition to any home décor. Every purchase is a donation to the synagogue. Please contact Sarah in the office at 310.474.0559 with your interest.

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Resh Lakish said: He who entertains a suspicion against the innocent will be bodily afflicted, as it is written, Moses replied: But they will not believe me. However, it was known to the Holy One blessed be He, that Israel would believe. He said to Moses: They are believers, the children of believers, but you will ultimately disbelieve. They are believers, as it is written, and the people believed (Ex. 4: 31). The children of believers [as it is written], and he [Abraham] believed in the Lord. But you will ultimately disbelieve, as it is said, [And the Lord said to Moses] Because you did not believe in Me (Num. 20:12). How do we know that he was afflicted? Because it is written, And the Lord said to him, Put your hand inside your cloak . . . (Ex. 4:6). (B.T. Shabbat 97a)

This is an extraordinary passage. Moses, it now becomes clear, was entitled to have doubts about his own worthiness for the task. What he was not entitled to do was to have doubts about the people. In fact, his doubts were amply justified. The people were fractious. Moses calls them a "stiff necked people". Time and again during the wilderness years they complained, sinned, and wanted to return to Egypt. Moses was not wrong in his estimate of their character. Yet G-d reprimanded him; indeed punished him by making his hand leprous. A fundamental principle of Jewish leadership is intimated here for the first time: a leader does not need faith in himself, but he must have faith in the people he is to lead.

This is an exceptionally important idea. The political philosopher Michael Walzer has written insightfully about social criticism, in particular

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about two stances the critic may take vis-à-vis those he criticizes. On the one hand there is the critic as outsider. At some stage, beginning in ancient Greece:

Detachment was added to defiance in the self-portrait of the hero. The impulse was Platonic; later on it was Stoic and Christian. Now the critical enterprise was said to require that one leave the city, imagined for the sake of the departure as a darkened cave, find one's way, alone, outside, to the illumination of Truth, and only then return to examine and reprove the inhabitants. The critic-who-returns doesn't engage the people as kin; he looks at them with a new objectivity; they are strangers to his new-found Truth.

This is the critic as detached intellectual. The prophets of Israel were quite different. Their message, writes Johannes Lindblom, was "characterized by the principle of solidarity". "They are rooted, for all their anger, in their own societies," writes Walzer. Like the Shunamite woman (Kings 2 4:13), their home is "among their own people". They speak, not from outside, but from within. That is what gives their words power. They identify with those to whom they speak. They share their history, their fate, their calling, their covenant. Hence the peculiar pathos of the prophetic calling. They are the voice of G-d to the people, but they are also the voice of the people to G-d. That, according to the sages, was what G-d was teaching Moses: What matters is not whether they believe in you, but whether you believe in them. Unless you believe in them, you cannot lead in the way a prophet must lead. You must identify with them and have

faith in them, seeing not only their surface faults but also their underlying virtues. Otherwise, you will be no better than a detached intellectual – and that is the beginning of the end. If you do not believe in the people, eventually you will not even believe in G-d. You will think yourself superior to them, and that is a corruption of the soul.

The classic text on this theme is Maimonides' Epistle on Martyrdom. Written in 1165, when Maimonides was thirty years old, it was occasioned by a tragic period in medieval Jewish history when an extremist Muslim sect, the Almohads, forced many Jews to convert to Islam under threat of death. One of the forced converts (they were called anusim; later they became known as marranos) asked a rabbi whether he might gain merit by practising as many of the Torah's commands as he could in secret. The rabbi sent back a dismissive reply. Now that he had forsaken his faith, he wrote, he would achieve nothing by living secretly as a Jew. Any Jewish act he performed would not be a merit but an additional sin.

Maimonides' Epistle is a work of surpassing spiritual beauty. He utterly rejects the rabbi's reply. Those who keep Judaism in secret are to be praised, not blamed. He quotes a whole series of rabbinic passages in which G-d rebukes prophets who criticized the people of Israel, including the one above about Moses. He then writes:

If this is the sort of punishment meted out to the pillars of the universe – Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, and the ministering angels – because they briefly criticized the Jewish congregation, can one have an idea of the fate of the least among the worthless [i.e. the rabbi who criticized the

forced converts] who let his tongue loose against Jewish communities of sages and their disciples, priests and Levites, and called them sinners, evildoers, gentiles, disqualified to testify, and heretics who deny the Lord G-d of Israel?

The Epistle is a definitive expression of the prophetic task: to speak out of love for one's people; to defend them, see the good in them, and raise them to higher achievements through praise, not condemnation.

Who is a leader? To this, the Jewish answer is, one who identifies with his or her people, mindful of their faults, to be sure, but convinced also of their potential greatness and their preciousness in the sight of G-d. "Those people of whom you have doubts," said G-d to Moses, "are believers, the children of believers. They are My people, and they are your people. Just as you believe in Me, so you must believe in them."

Shabbat Shalom

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Saturday, January 26, 2013

following Shabbat Shira services

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