

Message from the Parsha

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In Search of Leadership

As Israel enters the tumultuous summer of 2024, we find ourselves in the grip of protests that bring tens of thousands to the streets each week. Unlike last year's focus on judicial reform, today's demonstrations reflect a nation deeply divided over the ongoing war, the fate of hostages still held in Gaza, sharing of the military burden, and calls for new elections. The tone of the rhetoric is becoming toxic as the intensity of the protests has increased. The fact is that many people do not trust the current leadership, believing that they are more concerned with their political futures than with the fate of the country.

How can we bridge these ever growing rifts in our society while effectively addressing the existential issues that face us? What type of leader do we need in this time of profound crisis?

Perhaps the answer can be found in an examination of the leadership transition described in the second half of Bamidbar and in D'varim.

The Torah repeatedly reminds us that Moshe will not enter Eretz Yisrael. Instead, a new leader will be guiding the nation through the complex moral

and strategic dilemmas that will be faced upon entering the Promised Land. Moshe's fate is initially pronounced after he strikes the rock, back in Parshat Chukat. Yet in our parsha this week, which begins in the middle of the crisis of the Jewish people engaging with Moav in acts of idolatry and orgiastic behavior, culminating with the Jewish prince Zimri performing a public lewd act with the Midianite princess Kozbi, Moshe's fate is again repeated (Bamidbar 26:65 and 27:12-14). From the rock incident to Parshat V'zot HaBracha and including this week's reading, the Torah reiterates Moshe's punishment multiple times, even though Moshe's actual passing doesn't occur until the Torah's final verses.

The repetition that Moshe will not enter the Land, and that he will be succeeded as a leader, highlights the fact that Moshe's striking the rock was not in and of itself so heinous a crime that it warranted so grave a punishment. Rather, as noted by the Sfat Emet (Chukat 5647), the rock episode served as a symptom of a larger systemic issue: how Moshe engaged with the second generation of Jews in the desert.

Moshe Rabeinu - MOSHIAN SHEL YISRAEL, the savior of Israel (Sota 12b) - begins his own story with a display of empathy towards his enslaved brethren, whose oppression

he witnessed. The generation that left Egypt had been robbed of a normal life, living under the lash of the Egyptian taskmasters, with the threat of death for disobeying orders a daily possibility. They had their marital lives disrupted, their family lives destroyed, and their very children cast helplessly into the Nile. From the very beginning, Moshe is taken by their suffering, willing to forgive their indulgences and rebelliousness, and he defends their misdoings to God time and time again.

But the same can't be said for the second generation, the children of the enslaved, born into freedom in the desert. The only life they knew was miraculous! Their clothing grew with their bodies; their food and drink came from heaven; their pathway was miraculously lit up by the Almighty. Their challenges were minor compared to those of their parents, who suffered through backbreaking labor amid a spell of Divine silence over years of oppression.

Yet despite being blessed with all the comforts they could have ever imagined, this younger generation fails to step up to the plate, instead complaining incessantly and venting their frustrations. They demand more water; they sin at Baal Peor; they ask to stay on the eastern bank of the Jordan - and throughout all this, Moshe freezes. He falls silent, even cries, as he fails to communicate with

the people and help them move forward. And at each of these occasions, God reminds Moshe that his time is up, that the time has come for new leadership. Truth be told, Moshe knows it too. In our parsha, he even addresses God directly, asking that a new leader be appointed who can better understand the particular needs of the new generation.

Moshe spoke to Hashem, saying: "Let God, Source of the breath of all flesh, appoint someone over the community who shall go out before them and come in before them, and who shall take them out and bring them in, so that God's community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd. (Bamidbar 27:15-17)

The need for attentive, well-matched leadership is a perennial issue that continues to hold true today as much as it did in the Biblical wilderness. In our generation, we need leaders who are visionaries for the future of the Jewish people, including feeling the urgency with which we must find a way for all members of our society to take part in defending the homeland. Yet we need leaders that can also empathize and appreciate the difficulty in implementing such a vision. For example, when it comes to sharing the defense burden, we need national leaders who will make sure to provide conditions in the military to maximize the comfort of incoming recruits. In our generation, we also

need religious leaders who are unafraid to chart new territory, albeit within the confines of halacha, in making our communal spaces welcoming to women, LGBTQ people, and others who find themselves today at the periphery of our communal tapestry. We need leaders who can encourage those who are formally observant to be deliberate about their Jewish experience while providing space for those who are serious Jews but not themselves observant. In our generation, we need Jewish leaders who celebrate individuality, who will empower our community and challenge our people, as Elie Wiesel once said, 'to think higher and live deeper'.

Generations ago, Yehoshua was chosen to succeed Moshe. While he inherited Moshe's tradition, Yehoshua's personality set him apart from his mentor. Today we face a similar transition: our rapidly evolving world demands new leadership, and throughout this ongoing conflict, we've witnessed the emergence of an unexpected cohort of communal leaders: our youth. This younger generation, shaped by contemporary challenges, is already stepping into roles that echo the transition from Moshe to Yehoshua.

Our youth have helped to give birth to our nation for a second time. They have been involved in its rethinking and transformation. They have been

assuming civic responsibility. Not running away from the draft but, at the rate of 130%, embracing their responsibility. Many have sacrificed their lives at the very moment in which they were overflowing with promise. But to quote Yami Weiser, father of a fallen soldier and beloved Ohr Torah Stone alumnus, his son Roey "did not fall in battle, he was elevated in battle."

Over the past nine months, we have seen high school students clean out hundreds of bomb shelters, engage with children who have moved to the merkaz, seeking safety from the South and the North, and for families whose parents are in milu'im. Young parents who were not called up to serve spent evenings cleaning school toilets to keep the schools open in the absence of adequate staff, and students swept the floors and straightened up classrooms to make sure their schools were ready for the next day.

We must embrace and encourage this momentum, as communities and a nation, to create the opportunities and environment for our youth to be further nurtured and for their potential to continue to be actualized. For I have faith that it is they, the leaders of tomorrow, who are best suited to show us the way forward. Like Yehoshua, they understand the challenges of these times.