Timely Leadership--Thoughts for Parashat Hukkat

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Thoughts on Parashat Hukkat

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Torah portion relates the episode where the Israelites complain bitterly that they need water. They ask Moses why he took them from Egypt only to let them die of thirst in the wilderness. What kind of leader was he, if this is all he could do for them?

God told Moses: "take the staff and assemble the community, you and your brother Aaron, and speak to the rock before their eyes that it may give forth its water." Moses gathered the people, called them rebels, and then struck the rock twice--rather than speaking to it, as God had commanded. Water did emerge, and the Israelites' thirst was quenched. Yet, because Moses hit the rock instead of speaking to it, God told Moses and Aaron they would not be allowed to enter the Promised Land. They effectively became "lame duck" leaders.

Many commentators wonder why Moses and Aaron were punished so severely for a seemingly minor transgression. After all, the first time a similar event happened, Moses had hit the rock and water emerged--and this was a great miracle and was considered praiseworthy. Rabbi Hayyim Angel offered an interesting explanation. The first time Moses hit the rock was at the beginning of the 40 year period between the exodus and entry into the Promised Land. The people were still mired in a slave mentality. Hitting the rock symbolized a strong leadership; Moses needed strict discipline to keep the people in order. But the second time Moses hit the rock, it was 40 years later. A new generation had arisen. The old-timers who had been slaves in Egypt had died off. God told Moses to speak to the rock, indicating that a new style of leadership was now needed for this new generation. Speaking and explaining will be more effective than forceful disciplinarian tactics. Yet, Moses did not fully grasp this message, and fell back on his traditional style of leadership--he hit the rock now, as he had done 40 years previously.

God thus realized that Moses and Aaron--who had been brilliant leaders for their generation--were no longer able to lead the new generation. They were still operating with their old assumptions and tactics, even though new assumptions and new strategies were needed. Moses and Aaron were not being "punished" for a sin, but were being replaced because different leadership was now needed for the new generations.

An indication of the change that had taken place within the Israelite community is evidenced in the song they sang at the well (Bemidbar 21:17-18.) "Then sang Israel this song..." When the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea 40 years earlier, they had sung a song: "Then sang Moses and the children of Israel..." In that earlier song, Moses had led the people and the people responded to his words. But now, 40 years later, "then sang Israel this song", the people were now able to sing their own song, without Moses leading them. They had become spiritually mature and independent. This is a singular testimony to the success of Moses as a teacher--that he raised a generation that was able to sing praises to God on its own, without needing him to spoon feed them the words and sentiments. Yet, Moses himself seems not to have recognized how well he had succeeded.

Leaders--and parents--need to know how to lead and teach their communities and their children in ways that are appropriate to the particular circumstances. They constantly need to reevaluate their methods of communication, and they need to be sure that they are flexible enough to adapt to new situations. The goal is to create communities and children who can grow, assume increasing responsibility, and ultimately stand on their own.

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