Why Didn't the Israelites Pray for Moses?--Thoughts for Parashat Ekev

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ekev

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In last week's Torah portion, Va-et-hanan, we read of Moses' plea to the Almighty to let him enter the Promised Land. With consummate humility and piety, Moses prayed that God would allow him the satisfaction of completing his mission as leader of the Israelites. He had devoted forty difficult years in the wilderness, in the hope of bringing the people of Israel into the land of milk and honey. In spite of Moses' heartfelt prayer, the Almighty did not rescind His verdict that Moses was not to enter the Promised Land. God told him to ascend the mountain and look at the land in the distance--that was as close as Moses would get to his goal.

A question arises: why do we hear nothing at all about the Israelites' reaction to God's decree? Why didn't they pray on behalf of their faithful leader? Why didn't they announce to God that they themselves would not enter the Promised Land unless Moses were allowed to enter with them? Why was there no expression of loyalty to or empathy with Moses?

After all that Moses had done for them, it would seem obvious that the people of Israel would have sought God's mercy and kindness to their leader and teacher. But there is no record of their concern at all.

Perhaps this week's Torah portion, Ekev, offers a hint of an answer. Moses reminds the Israelites that during their forty years in the wilderness God provided them with Manna from heaven; He provided them with clothing that didn't wear out; He protected their feet from swelling. In short, the Israelites did not have to worry about their day to day provisions. In a certain sense, then, they grew complacent. Their material needs were provided to them miraculously. While this was certainly a good thing for them, it also had a downside. They became so self-satisfied, that their ability to empathize about the needs of others was diminished. A Judeo-Spanish proverb has it that one with a full stomach does not

understand the pain of the one who is hungry.

The Israelites had wandered for forty years. They were anxious to get into the Promised Land. Their focus was on their own needs. They didn't think much about the feelings of Moses. After all, if God judged that Moses should not enter the Land, then so be it. They didn't have time or interest to create a stir: they wanted to move forward, with or without Moses didn't really matter very much.

The Torah may be teaching us--by the silence of the Israelites--something very deep (and troubling) about human nature. It wasn't that the Israelites were bad people. No, they were simply "normal" people who wanted to get on with their lives. They "used" Moses as long as he was available. When he could no longer deliver them goods and services, they turned their thoughts to the next leader and to their future journeys. When God told Moses he would not enter the Promised Land, the Israelites offered no resistance, no prayers, no solace to Moses. In their eyes, he had become a "lame duck".

While the behavior of the Israelites was "normal", it nevertheless should raise questions in our own minds. If we were in their situation, would we have shown empathy for Moses? Would we have joined him in praying to God? Would we have made a clear demonstration of loyalty and appreciation?

In our modern society, one of the common complaints is that people are expendable. Loyalty and devotion are made subservient to utilitarian concerns and "market forces". People are used--and then discarded.

The behavior of the Israelites--as so much of modern behavior--is "normal". Yet, our task isn't to be satisfied with being "normal". We need to strive for true righteousness. True righteousness requires us to be sensitive, compassionate, loyal, appreciative.

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