Leadership and "Gloomititis": Thoughts for Parashat Hukkat

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Hukkat

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“And there was no water for the congregation; and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. And the people strove with Moses and spoke saying: would that we had perished when our brethren perished before the Lord! And why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness to die there, we and our cattle? And why have you made us come out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place…And Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly unto the door of the tent of meeting, and they fell on their faces…” (Bemidbar 20: 3-6).

A great crisis arose: the people were thirsty; they needed water. In desperation, they complained bitterly to Moses and Aaron. The leaders did not know how to respond; they retreated to the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. God then commanded Moses and Aaron to speak to a rock, and water would come forth. Moses and Aaron gathered the people: “Hear now, you rebels! Are we to bring you water out of this rock?” Moses struck the rock twice and water came forth abundantly.

God then informed Moses and Aaron that they failed to sanctify God during this episode, and that they would therefore not lead the people into the promised land. Moses and Aaron would die before reaching their goal.

Biblical commentators have tried to understand what Moses and Aaron did incorrectly so as to incur God’s displeasure. Some suggest that they sinned by speaking disdainfully to the Israelites, referring to them as “rebels.” Others suggest that Moses struck the rock rather than speaking to it, thereby not following God’s specific instructions.

Perhaps, though, there is another way of understanding this story.

The people were thirsty and were growing increasingly distressed and angry. Why hadn't Moses and Aaron themselves noticed the shortage of water? Why did they need the people to come to complain to them? Shouldn't leaders be looking out for the welfare of their people, and shouldn't they realize when the people's basic needs are not being met? Why didn't Moses and Aaron pray to God for water well in advance of the people's complaints? They could have entirely avoided the crisis if they had been more in touch with the people.

Perhaps their error was not being sufficiently aware of the needs and the moods of the people. When leaders lose touch, they open the door to dissatisfaction, complaints, disaffection.

In his book, "Other People's Trades," (Summit Books, New York, 1989) Primo Levi writes about an assignment given to a sixth grade class. Students were asked to describe an invented animal. One of the students wrote of a huge animal of incredible strength that had bones harder than steel. This animal "has twelve hearts and sixty ribs and could be feared as invincible and immortal; however he is afraid of only one disease, gloomititus, which for him is fatal" (p. 41).

"Gloomititis" is fatal because it saps the animal of self-confidence and the ability to act. Even though this monster is so powerful and seemingly invincible, it is undermined when it succumbs to gloom. It sinks into a helpless stupor.

It would seem that the people of Israel fell victim to "gloomititis." They forgot about all the miracles that had brought them this far and that continued to sustain them. They forgot about the many wonderful things that Moses and Aaron did for them. Instead, they lost heart; everything seemed bleak; they thought that death was preferable to their current situation.

Moses and Aaron had been unable to foresee or fend off the "gloomititis." This, it may be suggested, was the "sin" that disqualified them from entering the promised land. They had fallen out of touch with the needs and feelings of the people, and thus they were no longer able to lead them properly.

Angel for Shabbat