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By
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In this week's Parasha, we read of the Israelites' complaint of lack of water; of God's instruction to Moses to speak to the rock; of Moses striking the rock to bring forth water; of God informing Moses that he would not be allowed to enter the Promised Land. Moses had erred; he and Aaron were told by God: "Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them" (Bemidbar 20:12).

Upon hearing this news, Moses must have felt devastated. After all the years of devoted service, he was now told that he would not be allowed to finish his mission.

How does the Torah describe Moses' reaction to God's decree? Do we read of Moses asking forgiveness? Do we learn that he atoned for his transgression? Do we see Moses crying, beseeching, praying, asking for another chance?

No, none of the above.

Immediately after the verses in which God's decree is announced, the Torah goes on: "And Moses sent messengers from Kadesh unto the king of Edom…"(20:14). Moses was moving ahead with plans to direct the Israelites into the Promised Land. He was seeking permission from the neighboring rulers to let the Israelites pass through their lands, as they proceeded to the land that God had given to them.

Yes, as his death approached, Moses did plead with the Almighty for the privilege of entering the Promised Land (Devarim 3:23-25). But at the very moment of God's decree, the Torah does not report any reaction on the part of Moses. Rather, it describes Moses proceeding with his work as though nothing fateful had just happened to him.

Moses placed the needs of the people above his own personal concerns. He must have been heartbroken at hearing God's decree, but he did not let his own feelings and frustrations get in the way of his leadership of the Israelites.

Moses was a singular leader. He kept focused on his responsibilities to his people, even at great personal sacrifice.

Moses set an example of what true leadership entails. He provided guidance on the nature of responsibility.

In a recent talk, Rabbi Avi Weiss described “mission-directed” leadership. Such leaders have a grand vision of what needs to be accomplished and they devote their lives to striving toward their goals. Rabbi Weiss contrasted this kind of leader to one who is “function-directed.” The latter does his/her job, with better or worse results, without any overriding idealism.

These types of leaders are paralleled by the kinds of institutions they lead. Function-directed synagogues provide prayer services, some classes, and other programs that congregants may demand. They operate as function-providing businesses. Their goal is to operate from day to day, and year to year, as they have done in the past.

Mission-directed synagogues are very different. They not only provide the services of function-directed synagogues, but they have long term goals, idealistic plans, religious vision. They plan for the future in creative ways. They seek to attract people by offering a spiritual message.

Some rabbis and lay leaders think that it is enough to maintain the status quo, or to promote their “businesses” with p.r. efforts. Such function-directed leaders and institutions betray the very ideals and idealism upon which religious institutions must be based. They tend to put their own egos before the religious needs of the community. They use the synagogue for self-promotion; they hunger for control and influence.

Other rabbis and lay leaders are mission-directed. They strive to bring the Divine Presence into the midst of their synagogues and their congregants. They serve with utmost idealism and piety, not for self-aggrandizement or personal gain. Such mission-directed leaders and their communities seek to go beyond providing functions; they seek to inspire ideals, to enhance spirituality, to actively work for the betterment of society as a whole.

Moses is remembered in our tradition as “Moshe Rabbeinu,” Moses our teacher. We look to his example as a mission-directed leader. He devoted his life to bringing his people closer to God, and God closer to his people. Moses faced many challenges and frustrations; but he did not lose his sense of mission. Even when he was faced with a personally devastating decree, his first reaction was: what shall I do next to help my people achieve their goal?

Are our rabbis and synagogues mission-directed, or only function-directed? This is a question we ignore at our own spiritual peril.

Angel for Shabbat