



5 ways

to think about leadership

Stepping down from a leading role can be as challenging as stepping up to leadership. It is an issue for parents as much as politicians, for popes as much as CEOs. What insights might we glean from our Torah text to stimulate a discussion on leadership: its requirements, its development, its closure? Five thoughts follow:

- 1.** We grow into leadership and we evolve as leaders. When Moses was first called to the role he was a reluctant leader, protesting to God at the burning bush. The Moses who is told to step down in the Book of Numbers has become a very different kind of leader.
- 2.** Moses' leadership is not just a 'job,' it is deeply personal. In many ways he is like a parent to his people. As every parent knows, one can only take your children so far. At some point in life they go forward without you.
- 3.** It is sometimes said: an angry person makes a dangerous leader. This refers to chronic anger ('living' angrily) which poisons the atmosphere

of a community. According to the great medieval scholar Maimonides, Moses' *anger* is his undoing as a leader.

- 4.** Leaders operate in the midst of a certain time, generation, culture, peer group. Discuss the challenges of 'moving with the times' and responding to the challenges of a new generation.

- 5.** While much is said of Moses' leadership struggles, we might also enquire into Joshua's response. We know he accepts his commissioning, but what are his deeper reactions to the authority vested in him? The challenge of following a giant like Moses must be daunting to say the least.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

In the 1985 Vatican document "*Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church*" we find this statement:

Because of the unique relations that exist between Christianity and Judaism - "linked together at the very level of their identity" (John Paul II, 6th March, 1982)... the Jews and Judaism should not occupy an occasional and marginal place in catechesis: their presence there is essential and should be organically integrated. (n.2)

The document speaks of 'catechesis.' We might think of teachers in classrooms and homilists in pulpits. However catechesis, teaching the faith, is also a fundamental task of the home. Parents and other family members therefore are called to think carefully about how they speak of Jews and Judaism. What messages are they communicating to the next generation?

This *Light of Torah* series is an education tool suitable for domestic environments. By encouraging a love of Torah and an appreciation of Jewish interpreters it can assist in the transmission of positive attitudes towards the Jewish-Christian relationship.



Numbers 25:10—30:1

Pinchas



Light of Torah
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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Numbers 25:10—30:1

The Israelites are close to entering the promised land. God prepares Moses for his death, reminding him that he is not to enter the land, with reference to an upsetting incident that occurred at the waters of Meribath-kadesh (see Numbers 20:1-13).

In a previous Light of Torah leaflet we explored the question of why Moses was excluded from the promised land. Here we revisit the question from a different avenue of enquiry.

Tasting Torah

The Lord said to Moses, “Go up this mountain of the Abarim range, and see the land that I have given to the Israelites. When you have seen it, you shall be gathered to your people as your brother Aaron was [i.e., you shall die], because you rebelled against my word in the wilderness of Zin when the congregation quarreled with me. You did not show my holiness before their eyes at the waters. (Numbers 27:12-14)

Was Moses’ sin at the waters of Meribath-kadesh really so bad? Yes, we know that he lost patience with the people and struck the rock twice instead of once... but does the punishment really fit the crime? Over centuries of reflection, Torah commentators have offered diverse explanations. Review this incident in 20:1-13. Ponder the character of Moses, his past track record of leadership (e.g., at the Red Sea), the expectations of the people and the desperation of their drought-stricken situation.

Then, let’s follow the lead of a contemporary commentator, Mosheh Lichtenstein.¹

Touching Torah

Lichtenstein directs our attention to three Torah verses (Num.20:12; 27:14; Deut. 32:51). Each makes an association between the events at Meribath-kadesh and Moses’ inability to bring about a *Kiddush Hashem*, i.e., a sanctification of God’s name. For instance, Num.20:12 reads:

“Because you did not...show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites.”

That is, Moses’ actions at Meribath-kadesh do not result in God’s holiness being shown forth to the people. Reflect on the three verses above.

Depthing Torah

Lichtenstein argues that the events at Meribath-kadesh signal the essence of a far greater problem that plays out through the rebellion stories in Numbers. The problem is a developing chasm between Moses as original leader of the exodus and the new generation born in the wilderness. In this view, the striking of the rock is not the issue that prevents Moses from entering the land. What is really at stake is the growing alienation between Moses and his people. (Traditional commentators Rashbam and Ibn Ezra suggest that his ‘sin’ was not wicked defiance but a simple case of human failure.)

There is no doubt that Moses is a great leader and prophet. Yet, for whatever reason, his leadership and communication skills are not working for this new breed of Israelite. He has lost his rapport with the people, unable to provide the guidance they need. As a result (and this is the critical point) *God’s Name is not being sanctified*. The people require a different leader to take them through the next stage of Israel’s journey. The chosen leader is Joshua. He is the one to take the Israelites into the promised land.

Doing Torah

One might argue that, even if ‘stood down’ as leader, could not God have allowed Moses to enter the land as a private citizen? How do you respond? Note: In the Midrash Moses pleads to be permitted to enter as a simple Jew who would now be able to perform the *Mitzvot Hatehuyot Ba’Aretz* (i.e., those commands which apply uniquely to those who dwell in the land of Israel).



Another view

Looking ahead to Deuteronomy, we find Moses explaining his exclusion from the land in terms of God’s anger at the spies:

“Even with me the Lord was angry on your account, saying, “You shall not enter there” (Deut. 1:37).

From here it could be argued that, because the consequences of the sin of the spies are suffered communally, Moses’ fate is bound up with the fate of the first generation destined to die before reaching the promised land. As leader of his people, Moses ‘stays behind’ with his people.

1. See Mosheh Lichtenstein, *Moses: Envoy of God, Envoy of his people* (NJ: KTAV, 2008) Scripture: NRSV.