



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

Leadership lessons in the desert

The grumbings of the Israelites and the leadership frustrations of Moses form a familiar theme as the forty year wilderness saga unfolds in the Hebrew Scriptures, especially in the Book of Exodus and the Book of Numbers. Here, let's consider an early example of it in Exodus 15-17.

By this stage of the Exodus narrative, the once-enslaved Hebrew people have only just won their freedom through miraculous events at the Red Sea, and already they are complaining: food is scarce, the water tastes bitter... *we'd be better off in Egypt!*

Take a moment to read this part of the story (15:22—17:7). Ponder the text. Place yourself in the shoes of the characters. Consider the various relationships: Moses and people; God and people; Moses and God...

Now, let's focus on the rebellion at their campsite at Rephidim (17:1-7). Moses, upset and struggling, cries out to God:

"What shall I do with this people? Before long they will be stoning me!" (17:4).

In response, God will instruct Moses to strike the rock at Mt Horeb to bring forth water to slake the people's thirst. But first we meet this puzzling phrase:

"The Lord said to Moses, 'Pass before the people...'" (17:5)

Why this apparently superfluous instruction to 'pass before the people'? Would it change anything if omitted? What purpose does it serve? This question has intrigued Jewish commentators throughout the centuries, and it invites our own creative interpretation. As Moses vents his own frustration perhaps we are thinking that he deserves an extra pat on the back or a word of assurance from God for all his unappreciated efforts. But look how our puzzling phrase is imaginatively interpreted by the Midrash, the storytelling traditions of Judaism:

"The Holy One blessed be He answered Moses: Is that the way you talk? Pass on before the people and we shall see who will stone you! [As Moses passes he finds the people standing in respect.] How often have I told you not to order them about, but to lead them like a shepherd his flock; remember it was for their sake that I brought you out of Egypt..."¹

The great 11th century Torah commentator known as Rashi interprets simply:

"And see if they stone you. Why have you slandered my children?"

The Zohar, a commentary influenced by Jewish mysticism,² is even more explicit:

"God replied: Now is not the time to stand up for your rights. Are you in their power or Mine?"

In one subtle phrase, the Torah puts the predicament in perspective: God's priority is not to shore up an anxious leader whose feelings have been hurt; it is to show relentless love for his people; to believe in them and expect the best of them. This is a tough but important leadership lesson for his chosen servant Moses, who himself has not shared the slavery experience of the people.

What is your response to this view? Do you interpret differently to the sages quoted? As God teaches Moses about servant leadership, how is God teaching you in your unique leadership role in life?

1. Midrash Tanhuma Beshallah 22
2. Zohar: first publicized in 13th century Spain.

Source: This article draws on the teaching of Nehama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (NY, 1996), 273-283. Scripture translation: JPS.