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LEADING TO GOD'S MIRACLES

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

In *parashat Korach*, the weekly Torah reading, we encounter Korach's insurrection against Moses and Aaron, essentially against their mission from God. Our traditional Torah commentators conclude that Korach may be fairly characterized as an aberrant leader, because he deviated from the proper and expected path of Israelite leadership.

Apart from examining Korach's individual aberrant behavior, however, it's also important to consider why so many people were susceptible to leaders who would misguide them. We suggest the most compelling explanation is that, following the incident with the spies, the people were demoralized by the prospect of never entering the land, and perishing in the wilderness. Their shattered morale produced a crisis of faith, allowing self-serving leaders an opening to distort social realities convincingly—defining goodness as evil, benefactors as enemies, success as failure, and so on.

It was a moment in the early history of our people when there was a crucial need to rekindle faith in God's commissioning of Moses' leadership and his mission. The people were grumbling about leaving Egypt—after the death of Miriam there wasn't any water to drink (Numbers 20:2-5)—so God spoke to Moses and said:

“Take the staff [which he had used to perform the miracles in Egypt] and gather the congregation together, you and Aaron your brother, and speak you to the rock before their eyes that it shall give forth its water, and you shall bring water for them out of the rock. . . .” (Numbers 20:8)

Water from a rock?! If this isn't convincing, renewing the faith of the people, nothing will be. It's arguably conclusive proof that Moses is doing the will of God.

God tells Moses to *speak* to the rock, but instead he *strikes* the rock, two times—and thereby seals his fate to die in the wilderness.

Moses was given an opportunity—by declaring that water would flow from the rock—to demonstrate conclusively that he was acting as God's agent, that God had neither abandoned him nor the people.

But the possibility of seeing water flow from the rock didn't exist because Moses struck it or the people threatened to return to Egypt. Moses was without any extraordinary powers of his own; he could no more make water flow from a rock than you or us. And water doesn't flow from rocks because people threaten to backslide.

God's purpose seemingly was to demonstrate that He had led them to a location where He had already created water, which was ready to burst forth at a particular moment as a perfectly naturalistic event. A miracle of supernatural proportions was not required.

Apart from the consequence Moses suffers for failing to follow what he himself regards as God's instruction, there is an important lesson here for leaders of the Jewish people. What we think of as miraculous events are often only such in respect to the time and place when they occur. For example, the separation of the Reed Sea to allow our people to escape the Egyptians is not necessarily, in itself, a miraculous event.

Consider this relatively recent description of the “opening” of the Chesapeake Bay:

“I wanted to share with you an extraordinary event I was fortunate enough to witness yesterday. On Monday night, the same storm that delivered the snow to New England made itself felt here on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Throughout the night there was a strong East wind. When I awoke, the Chesapeake Bay had receded at least thirty feet, laying bare the dry land.

“The wind held back the wall of water as I watched my neighbor climb down a ladder walk

around the docks that just hours ago had hovered over the water. The dry land extended as far north and south as the eye can see, and it remained that way all day. Parts of it were so dry that the wind kicked up dust storms from what is usually thick black mud.

“The water that separates this island from the mainland a little further north was also blown back and one could truly walk across the channel to the next town. It truly was a wonder and I’m grateful to have been privileged to have this gift, especially so close to Pesach.”

What made a similar event miraculous some three thousand years ago is that our leader, Moses, led the “mixed multitude” to such a place at such a time that they were able to escape their oppressors.

What is extraordinary is that, all together, we are at the right place at the right time—by virtue of our faith.

Moses was moved by God to lead the people to the right place at the right time, where water would emerge from a rock—which in itself hardly seems extraordinary if one has done any backpacking.

It was an opportunity to witness the miraculous quality of God’s “nature,” to see what is always present in nature if we live according to what our tradition calls the *derekh hayashar* (דרך הישר), the righteous path of faith that is the shortest route between any two worthwhile points in life.

Why were the consequences of striking instead of speaking to the rock so severe for Moses?

The rabbis have been discussing this question for two millennia:

- Moses didn’t follow what he himself regarded as God’s instructions (Rashi);
- He lost self-control, becoming angry and referring to the people as rebels, implicitly suggesting that *God* was angry with them, which the text gives us no reason to believe (Rambam);
- Moses questioned rhetorically, “Shall we bring forth water?” (Numbers 20:10) giving the impression that he and Aaron, not God, had the power to produce water (Rabbi Chananel); and
- Moses didn’t perform the task in a way that the people would *see*—*internalizing* the knowledge—that God would give them whatever

they needed to do His will (Chiddushei Ha-Rim).

Another reason may have been critical in that it was the underpinning of all the other possibilities: Moses may have had a loss of faith, becoming demoralized by the backsliding and grumbling of the people, and momentarily he may have doubted the outcome of God’s mission.

It brings us to an important point for all of us as leaders—*all* of us, because at one time or another each of us is obliged to lead by contributing our unique gifts to the congregational community.

So what does it mean to say that Moses—or we—have a loss of faith, which prevents us from leading? To ask the question positively, what does it mean to act on our faith? What does it mean to take the righteous path that may lead us to the right place at the right time to find the miraculous character of God’s nature?

We identify at least two kinds of faith:

- One type of faith reflects a belief that God has created within us the wherewithal to believe that *God can act* in ways that are entirely outside of our reason and experience. Here “leap of faith” means we *set aside our reason and experience* to believe that *God will create* greater goodness in the world.
- A second type of faith reflects a belief that, because of what God has created within us, *we can act* in ways that are entirely outside of our reason and experience. Here “leap of faith” means we allow *ourselves to create* greater goodness in the world *even though our reason and experience reject that possibility*.

Most of us experience both types of faith to a greater or lesser degree; they’re not mutually exclusive.

If we *act* on our faith, ignoring our reason and experience, keeping to the *derekh hayashar* and choosing to accept God’s nature fully, we will be doing everything possible to lead ourselves and others to those times and places where God’s miracles are waiting for us—as the water was waiting for Moses and the people in the wilderness.

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