

Leadership and the People

SH'MOT

The sedra of Sh'mot, in a series of finely etched vignettes, paints a portrait of the life of Moshe, culminating in the moment at which God appears to him in the bush that burns without being consumed. It is a key text of the Torah view of leadership, and every detail is significant. I want here to focus on just one passage in the long dialogue in which God summons Moshe to undertake the mission of leading the Israelites to freedom - a challenge which, no less than four times, Moshe declines. I am unworthy, he says. I am not a man of words. Send someone else.

It is the second refusal, however, which attracted special attention from the Sages and led them to formulate one of their most radical interpretations. The Torah states:

Moshe replied: "But they will not believe me. They will not listen to me. They will say, 'God did not appear to you.'" (Sh'mot 4:1)

The Sages, ultra-sensitive to nuances in the text, evidently noticed three strange features of this response.

The first is that God had already told Moshe, "They will listen to you" (3:18). Moshe's reply seems to contradict God's prior assurance. To be sure, the commentators offered various harmonising interpretations. Ibn Ezra suggests that God had told Moshe that the elders would listen to him, whereas Moshe expressed doubts about the mass of the people. Ramban says that Moshe did not doubt that they would believe initially, but he thought that they would lose faith as soon as they saw that Par'o would not let them go. There are other explanations, but the fact remains that Moshe was not satisfied by God's assurance. His own experience of the fickleness of the people (one of them, years earlier, had already said, "Who made you ruler and judge over us?") made him doubt that they would be easy to lead.

The second anomaly is in the signs that God gave Moshe to authenticate his mission. The first (the staff that turns into a snake) and third (the water that turned into blood) reappear later in the story. They are signs that Moshe and Aharon perform not only for the Israelites but also for the Egyptians. The second, however, does not reappear. God tells Moshe to put his hand in his cloak. When he takes it out, he sees that it has become "M'TZORAAT as snow". What is the significance of this particular

sign? The Sages recalled that later, Miriam was punished with TZARAAT for speaking negatively about Moshe (Bamidbar 12:10). In general they understood TZARAAT as a punishment for lashon hara, derogatory speech. Had Moshe, perhaps, been guilty of the same sin?

The third detail is that, whereas Moshe's other refusals focused on his own sense of inadequacy, here he speaks not about himself but about the people. They will not believe him. Putting these three points together, the Sages arrived at the following comment:

Reish Lakish said: He who entertains a suspicion against the innocent will be bodily afflicted, as it is written, Moshe replied: But they will not believe me. However, it was known to the Holy One blessed be He, that Israel would believe. He said to Moshe: They are believers, the children of believers, but you will ultimately disbelieve. They are believers, as it is written, and the people believed (Sh'mot 4:31). The children of believers [as it is written], and he [Avraham] believed in the Lord. But you will ultimately disbelieve, as it is said, [And the Lord said to Moshe] Because you did not believe in Me (Bamidbar 20:12). How do we know that he was afflicted? Because it is written, And the Lord said to him, 'Put your hand inside your cloak'. (4:6., Shabbat 97a)

This is an extraordinary passage. Moshe, it now becomes clear, was entitled to have doubts about his own worthiness for the task. What he was not entitled to do was to have doubts about the people. In fact, his doubts were amply justified. The people were fractious. Moshe calls them a "stiff-necked people". Time and again during the wilderness years they complained, sinned, and wanted to return to Egypt. Moshe was not wrong in his estimate of their character. Yet God reprimanded him; indeed punished him by making his hand M'TZORAAT. A fundamental principle of Jewish leadership is intimated here for the first time: a leader does not need faith in himself, but he must have faith in the people he is to lead.

This is an exceptionally important idea. The political philosopher Michael Walzer has written insightfully about social criticism, in particular about two stances the critic may take vis-a-vis those he criticises. On the one hand there is the critic as outsider. At some stage, beginning in ancient Greece:

Detachment was added to defiance in the self-portrait of the hero. The impulse was Platonic; later on it was Stoic and Christian. Now the critical enterprise was said to require that one leave the city, imagined for the sake of the departure as a darkened cave, find one's way, alone, outside,

to the illumination of Truth, and only then return to examine and reprove the inhabitants. The critic-who-returns doesn't engage the people as kin; he looks at them with a new objectivity; they are strangers to his new-found Truth.

This is the critic as detached intellectual. The prophets of Israel were quite different. Their message, writes Johannes Lindblom, was "characterized by the principle of solidarity". "They are rooted, for all their anger, in their own societies", writes Walzer. Like the Shunamite woman (Melachim Bet 4:13), their home is "among their own people". They speak, not from outside, but from within. That is what gives their words power. They identify with those to whom they speak. They share their history, their fate, their calling, their covenant. Hence the peculiar pathos of the prophetic calling. They are the voice of God to the people, but they are also the voice of the people to God. That, according to the Sages, was what God was teaching Moshe: What matters is not whether they believe in you, but whether you believe in them. Unless you believe in them, you cannot lead in the way a prophet must lead. You must identify with them and have faith in them, seeing not only their surface faults but also their underlying virtues. Otherwise, you will be no better than a detached

intellectual - and that is the beginning of the end. If you do not believe in the people, eventually you will not even believe in God. You will think yourself superior to them, and that is a corruption of the soul.

The classic text on this theme is Rambam's Epistle on Martyrdom. Written in 1165, when Rambam was thirty years old, it was occasioned by a tragic period in medieval Jewish history when an extremist Muslim sect, the Almohads, forced many Jews to convert to Islam under threat of death. One of the forced converts (they were called anusim; later they became known as marranos) asked a rabbi whether he might gain merit by practising as many of the Torah's commands as he could in secret. The rabbi sent back a dismissive reply. Now that he had forsaken his faith, he wrote, he would achieve nothing by living secretly as a Jew. Any Jewish act he performed would not be a merit but an additional sin.

Rambam's Epistle is a work of surpassing spiritual beauty. He utterly rejects the rabbi's reply. Those who keep Judaism in secret are to be praised, not blamed. He quotes a whole series of rabbinic passages in which God rebukes prophets who criticised the people of Israel, including the one above about Moshe. He then writes:

If this is the sort of punishment

meted out to the pillars of the universe - Moshe, Eliyahu, Yishayahu, and the ministering angels - because they briefly criticized the Jewish congregation, can one have an idea of the fate of the least among the worthless [i.e. the rabbi who criticized the forced converts] who let his tongue loose against Jewish communities of Sages and their disciples, Kohanim and Levites, and called them sinners, evildoers, gentiles, disqualified to testify, and heretics who deny the Lord God of Israel?

The Epistle is a definitive expression of the prophetic task: to speak out of love for one's people; to defend them, see the good in them, and raise them to higher achievements through praise, not condemnation.

Who is a leader? To this, the Jewish answer is, one who identifies with his or her people, mindful of their faults, to be sure, but convinced also of their potential greatness and their preciousness in the sight of God. "Those people of whom you have doubts", said God to Moshe, "are believers, the children of believers. They are My people, and they are your people. Just as you believe in Me, so you must believe in them."

Around the Shabbat Table:

- (1) Why might believing in people be harder than believing in an idea or a mission?
- (2) How should a leader strike a balance between believing in their people while simultaneously seeing their flaws?
- (3) How does faith in others change the way we speak about them?

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH