לע"נ
הרב יעקב צבי ב"ר דוד אריה ז"ל
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

Moshe's Challenge

B'HA-ALO-T'CHA

It was the worst crisis in Moshe's life. Incited by the 'mixed multitude', the Israelites complain about the food:

'If only we had meat to eat. We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost - also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna.' (Bamidbar 11:4-6)

It was an appalling show of ingratitude, but not the first time the Israelites had behaved this way. Three earlier episodes are recorded in the book of Sh'mot (chapters 15-17) immediately after the crossing of the Red Sea. First at Mara, they complained that the water was bitter. Then, in more aggressive terms, they protested at the lack of food ('If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat round pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death'). Later, at Refidim, they grumbled at the absence of water, prompting Moshe to say to God, 'What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me!'

The episode in this week's Torah portion - at the place that became known as Kivrot HaTaava - was not, then, the first such challenge Moshe had faced, but the fourth. Yet Moshe's reaction this time is nothing less than complete despair:

'Why have You treated Your servant so badly?' asked Moshe of the Lord. 'Why have I found so little favour in Your sight that You lay all the burden of this people upon me? Was it I who conceived all this people? Was it I who gave birth to them all, that You should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nursemaid carries a baby,' to the land that You swore to their fathers? Where am I to get meat to give all this people when they come wailing to me, "Give us meat to eat"? I cannot bear all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how You treat me, kill me now, if I find any favour in Your sight, and let me not see my own misery.' (11:11-15)

It is an extraordinary outburst. Moshe prays to die. He is not the last prophet of Israel to do so. Eliyahu, Yirmiyahu and Yona did likewise - making us realise that even the greatest can have their moments of despair. Yet the case of Moshe is particularly puzzling. He had faced, and overcome, such difficulties before. Each time, God had answered the people's requests. He had sent

water, and manna, and quails. Moshe knew this. Why then did the fourth outburst of the people ('If only we had meat to eat') induce in this, the strongest of men, what seems nothing less than a complete break-down?

Equally strange is God's reaction:

'Gather for Me seventy of Israel's elders, whom you know to be the people's elders and officers, and bring them to the Tent of Meeting. Let them stand there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and place it upon them; they will share the burden of the people with you, and you will not have to bear it alone. (11:16-17)

To be sure, this is a response to Moshe's complaint, 'I cannot carry all these people by myself.' Yet both complaint and response are puzzling. In what way would the appointment of elders address the internal crisis Moshe was undergoing? Did he need them to help him find meat? Clearly not. Either it would appear by a miracle or it would not appear at all. Did he need them to share the burdens of leadership? The answer is again, No. Already, not long before, on the advice of his father-in-law Yitro, he had created an infra-structure of delegation. Yitro had said this:

'What you are doing is not good. You will be worn away, and this people along with you. It is too heavy a burden for you. You cannot carry it alone. Now listen to me, let me advise you; and may God be with you. You speak for the people before God, and bring their concerns to Him. And you must acquaint them with His precepts and laws, and make known to them the path they are to walk and the way they must act. You, as well, must seek out among the people capable men - God-fearing, trust-worthy men, who despise corruption; and appoint them over the people as leaders of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens.' (Sh'mot 18:18-21)

Moshe acted on the suggestion. He therefore already had assistants, deputies, a leadership team. In what way would this new appointment of seventy elders make a difference?

Besides which, why the emphasis in God's reply on spirit: 'I will take of the spirit that is on you and put the spirit on them'? In what way did the elders need to become prophets in order to help Moshe? Being a prophet does not help someone in carrying out administrative or other burdens of leadership. It helps only in knowing what guidance to give the people - and for this, one prophet, Moshe, is sufficient. To put it more precisely, either the seventy elders would deliver the same message as Moshe

or they would not. If they did, they would be superfluous. If they did not, they would undermine his authority (precisely what Yehoshua feared in Bamidbar 11:28).

Aware of the multiple difficulties in the text, Ramban offers the following interpretation:

Moshe thought that if they had many leaders, they would appease their wrath by speaking to their hearts when the people started complaining. Or it is possible that when the elders prophesied, and the spirit was on them, the people would know that the elders were established as prophets and would not all gather against Moshe but would ask for their desires from them as well.

Both suggestions are insightful, but neither is without difficulty. The first - that the elders would become peacemakers among the people - did not call for a new leadership cadre. Moshe already had the heads of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. The second - that their presence would diffuse the people's anger by giving them many people, not one, to complain to - is equally hard to understand. We recall that when the people had one other person to turn to with their concerns (Aharon), this led to the making of the Golden Calf. Why did God not 'take of the spirit' that was on Moshe and place it on Aharon at that time? It would have prevented the single greatest catastrophe in the wilderness years? Besides which, we do not find that the seventy elders actually did anything at Kivrot HaTaava. The text even says, "When the spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but they did not do so again." How then did this once-and-never-to-be-repeated flow of the prophetic spirit make a difference? The more we reflect on the passage, the more the difficulties multiply.

Yet something happened. Moshe's despair disappeared. His attitude was transformed. Immediately thereafter, it is as if a new Moshe stands before us, untroubled by even the most serious challenges to his leadership. When two of the elders, Eldad and Medad, prophesy not in the Tent of Meeting but in the camp, Yehoshua senses a threat to Moshe's authority and says, 'Moshe, my lord, stop them!' Moses replies, with surpassing generosity of spirit, 'Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them.' In the next chapter, when his own brother and sister, Aharon and Miriam, start complaining about him, he does nothing: 'Now Moshe was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.' Indeed, when God became angry at Miriam, Moshe prayed on her behalf. The despair has gone. The crisis has

passed. These two challenges were far more serious than the request of the people for meat, yet Moshe meets them with confidence and equanimity. Something has taken place between him and God and he has been transformed. What was it?

To understand the sequence of events we must first place them in their historical context. Rabbi Moshe Lichtenstein, in his insightful book on Moshe's leadership, TZIR V'TZON (Alon Shvut, 5762) notes that there is a marked change of tone between the book of Sh'mot and the book of Bamidbar. The complaints do not change, but God's and Moshe's responses do. In Sh'mot, God does not get angry with the people, or if He does, Moshe's prayers are able to turn away wrath. In Bamidbar, the response - sometimes God's, sometimes Moshe - are more unforgiving. What has changed?

R. Lichtenstein - correctly in my view - suggests that the early volatility of the people is forgivable. To be sure, they should have had faith in God, but they had never been faced with the Red Sea, or the desert, or lack of food and water before. Their greatest offence - making the Golden Calf - leads to a long pause in the narrative, essentially from Sh'mot 25 to Bamidbar 11. During this period, in response to Moshe's prayer for forgiveness, God instructs the people to build a Mishkan which will ensure His constant presence among them.

Much of the second half of Sh'mot, the entire book of Vayikra, and the first ten chapters of Bamidbar are dedicated to the details of the Sanctuary, the service that was to take place there, and the reconstitution of Israel as a holy nation camped, tribe by tribe, around it. The whole of this sequence of 53 chapters, all of which is set in the desert at Sinai, is a kind of meta-historical moment, a break in the journey of the Israelites from place to place. Time and space stand still. Between the twin events of the Giving of the Torah and the construction of the Mishkan, the Israelites are turned from an undisciplined mass of fugitive slaves into a nation whose constitution is the Torah, whose sovereign is God alone, and at whose centre (physically and metaphysically) is the Sanctuary (the Mishkan), the visible sign of God's Presence. They Israelites no longer what they were before they came to Sinai. They are now "a kingdom of kohanim and a holy nation."

Hence Moshe's despair when they grumbled about the food. They had done so before. But they were different before. They had not yet gone through the transformative experiences that shaped them as a nation. What caused Moshe's spirit to break was the fact that, no sooner

had they left the Sinai desert to begin the journey again, they reverted to their old habits of complaint as if nothing had changed. If the Revelation at Sinai, the experience of Divine anger at the Golden Calf, and the long labour of building the Mishkan had not changed them, what would or could? Moshe's despair is all too intelligible. For the first time since his mission began, he could see defeat staring him in the face. Nothing - or so it seemed - not miracles, deliverances, revelations, or creative labour, could change this people from a nation that focused on food into one that grasped the significance of the unique ethical-spiritual destiny to which they had been called. Perhaps God, from the perspective of eternity, could see some ray of hope in the future. Moshe, as a human being, could not. 'I would rather die', he utters, 'than spend the rest of my life labouring in vain.'

We now reach the point of speculation. I may be wrong (and the Netziv puts it another way in his introduction to Haamek Davar, section 5) but I interpret the sequence of events as follows:

There can come a time in the life of any truly transformative leader when the sun of hope is eclipsed by the clouds of doubt - not about God, but about people, above all about oneself. Am I really making a difference? Am I deceiving myself when I think I can change the world? I have tried, I have given the very best of my energies and inspiration, yet nothing seems to alter the depressing reality of human frailty and lack of vision. I have given the people the word of God Himself, yet they still complain, still they think only about the discomforts of today, not the vast possibilities of tomorrow. Such despair (lehavdil, Winston Churchill, who suffered from it, called it the 'black dog') can occur to the very greatest (to repeat, not only Moshe but also Eliyahu, Yirmiyahu, and Yona prayed to die). Moshe was the very greatest. Therefore God gave him the greatest gift of all - one that no one else has ever been given.

God let Moshe see the influence he had on others. For a brief moment God took 'the spirit that is on you and put it on them' so that Moshe could see the difference he had made to one group, the seventy elders. Moshe needed nothing more. He did not need their help. He did not need them to continue to prophesy. All he needed was a transparent glimpse of how his spirit had communicated itself to them. Then he knew he had made a difference. Little could he have known that he - who encountered almost nothing from the Israelites in his lifetime but complaints, challenges, and rebellions - would have so decisive an influence that the people of Israel 3300 years later would still be studying and living by

the words he transmitted; that he had helped forge an identity that would prove more tenacious than any other in the history of humankind; that in the full perspective of hindsight he would prove to have been the greatest leader that ever lived. He did not know these things; he did not need to know these things. All he needed was to see that seventy elders had internalised his spirit and made his message their own. Then he knew that his life was not in vain. He had disciples. His vision was not his alone. He had planted it in others. Others, too, would continue his work after his lifetime. That was enough for him, as it must be for us. Once Moshe knew this, he could face any challenge with equanimity (except, many years later, at Kadesh, but that is another story).

Understood thus, there is a message in Moshe's crisis for all of us (that, surely, is why it is recounted in the Torah). I remember when my late father z"l died and we - my mother and brothers - were sitting shiva. Time and again people would come and tell us of kindnesses he had done for them, in some cases more than 50 years before. I have since discovered that many people who have sat shiva have had similar experiences. How moving, I thought, and at the same time how sad, that my father z"l was not there to hear their words. What comfort it would have brought him to know that despite the many hardships he faced, the good he did was not forgotten. And how tragic that we so often keep our sense of gratitude to ourselves, saying it aloud only when the person to whom we feel indebted has left this life, and we are comforting his or her mourners.

Perhaps that just is the human condition. We never really know how much we have given others - how much the kind word, the thoughtful deed, the comforting gesture, changes lives and is never forgotten. In this respect, if in no other, we are like Moshe. He too was human; he had no privileged access into other people's minds; without a miracle, he could not have known the influence he had on those closest to him. All the evidence seemed to suggest otherwise. The people, even after all God and he had done for them, were still ungrateful, querulous, quick to criticise and complain. But that was on the surface. For a moment God gave him a glimpse of what was beneath the surface. He showed him how Moshe's spirit had entered others and lifted them, however briefly, to the level of prophetic vision.

God did this for no other person - not then, not now. But if it was enough for Moshe, it is enough for us. The good we do lives after us. It is the greatest thing that does. We may

leave a legacy of wealth, power, even fame, but these are questionable benefits and sometimes harm rather than help those we leave them to. What we leave to others is a trace of our influence for good. We may never see it, but it is there. That is the greatest blessing of leadership. It alone is the antidote to despair, the solid ground of hope.

Around the Shabbat Table:

(1) Why is it easier to complain about what we lack than to appreciate what we have?

(2) Consider the experience of the other prophets in Tanach. Did they have similar challenges to Moshe, or different ones?

(3) How would you apply the messages of this essay to your own life?

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH