

Weekly Teaching

June 22, 2018

It's commonly taught that Moses was punished because he hit the rock when he should have spoken to it.

According to *Midrash*, this is Moses' sin and the reason why he doesn't get to enter the land of Israel.

But, really there is a more basic truth that the Torah is recording for us.

Moses isn't necessarily being punished for a particular sin; rather he's simply no longer able to lead the Jewish people, and now a new generation of leaders is needed to guide the Israelites, such as Joshua and Caleb.

The proof text for understanding this lesson isn't Moses' hitting of the rock, but rather it's the incident prior, when his sister Miriam dies, and then there's no water.

The Israelites, as they always do, come to Moses and Aaron, and complain.

They shout: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt only to kill us in the desert?"

Then, we see how Moses and Aaron respond:

"They retreat from the People into the Tent of Meeting; where the People can't follow them. There, they fall on their faces."

This image is striking; the Israelites came, as they often have, to complain, but all Moses and Aaron can do is fall on their faces.

That Moses and Aaron are failing as leaders is shown by previous interactions with their ever-complaining People.

A few weeks ago, we read in the Torah of the spies who came back to the Israelites with a negative report about their Promised Land, the Land of Israel.

The spies argued that the Land couldn't be conquered. It was hopeless.

Here too, the Israelites shouted to Moses and Aaron, "You took us out of Egypt, only to die in this forsaken wilderness."

And here Moses and Aaron merely fell on their faces also.

It was Joshua and Caleb who responded to the people: "Believe in God; we can do it."

After the spy incident, there's the Korach rebellion against Moses and Aaron.

Neither leader could adequately address the concerns, so God put down the rebels.

This wasn't always the case.

Earlier in their leadership, Moses and Aaron had also faced complaints, even about a lack of water.

In the book of Exodus, Chapter 17, Moses is forceful in a response to the complaints of the Israelites: "Why are you fighting with me, why are you testing God?"

What happened to Moses and Aaron?

In the Book of Exodus they are heroes. But, as time passes, they can no longer lead.

Often great leaders have an expiration date.

Sometimes, the older generation of leaders—as great as they are—aren't the ones who can best communicate with a younger generation in new circumstances, and a new reality.

The Torah in this week's Torah portion paints a portrait of Moses and Aaron who, when faced with a challenge, no longer can deal with or relate to the Israelites.

Instead, Moses and Aaron retreat to the Great Tent, where they can't be followed, and they can no longer lead.

Moses and Aaron won't enter the Promised Land because they cannot lead any longer.

This is in fact the direct quote of Torah: "You will not lead the people into the land."

In theory, they could have entered the land as followers, but this was an impossible transition.

Too often, in the Jewish community, there's a crisis of leadership.

Present leaders need to continually renew their ties to the "next generation", or otherwise they too will end up retreating into the "Great Tent, where they can't be followed."

Constant renewal isn't always easy, but constantly worth the effort.

As Senior Rabbi for Temple Shalom, I have been blessed to serve in my rabbinic leadership for our congregational family for the past 23 years.

Last Friday evening, I shared a Shabbat Dinner with a few of our newest members, and I was again reminded of the need to constantly foster meaningful relationships with the next generation.

As rabbi, my spiritual leadership can only be effective if I can create an environment by which each Temple Shalom household can feel valued.

There can be no retreating into the "Great Tent" of past successes and past relationships; there is only the opportunity to renew old relationships, and create and grow new relationships.

The starting point, middle point, and end point for the rabbi begins with knowing one's congregation.

The summer time can be a little less hectic, and I invite you to set a date/time to share coffee with me, and help us renew old relationships, and nurture new ones.

I can be reached at my email address rabbimitch@templesholom.com or by calling 203-542-7150.

I look forward to connecting!

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Mitch