

The End of an Era – Parashat Chukat

This summer I've gone down a strange rabbit-hole into the fascinating world of business leaders gone both right and wrong. It started with Netflix' miniseries on Adam Neumann and We Work which then led me to Elizabeth Holmes and Theranos – both the Hulu show and John Carreyrou's blistering expose – and finally, because it was so often mentioned how Holmes fashioned herself in the image of Steve Jobs, I recently finished Walter Isaacson's biography of the great Apple founder. There are many interesting takeaways from the for-profit world that might be applied to the running of faith-based institutions in the constantly-changing, customization-seeking, tech-driven climate of 2022 where religion as a brand is on the decline and we're all searching for the next spiritual tool that people didn't even realize they simply can't live without. But what has most intrigued me about the stories of these three companies is the dazzling rise – and often spectacular fall! – of their leaders, individuals who all, despite their flaws, were extraordinarily talented in certain ways and who all, despite their brilliance, exhibited at certain times such terrible lapses in character and judgment that they were ultimately ousted from the very companies they had initially founded. Leaders can be tremendously successful and effective and respected until all of a sudden they're not. Indeed, that is one of the lessons of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Chukat*.

Parashat Chukat is often thought of as the story of Moses' downfall, as he stands in Meribah faced with an angry community of Israelites complaining of thirst. Traditional interpretation has it that Moses hits the rock rather than speaking to it in order to bring forth nourishment for the people thereby incurring Divine wrath, yet this explanation does not entirely hold water (if you excuse the pun). If it was Moses alone who hit the rock, why is his brother Aaron also implicated in the crime? And if Moses was meant

simply to speak to the rock, why did God have him first take up his staff, a particularly confounding direction given that back in Exodus it was precisely through striking rock that Moses was instructed to bring forth water for the people. Commentators throughout the ages have struggled to understand the exact nature of Moses' error along with why this act, amongst all those committed by the prophet, is seen as so singularly egregious so as to bar Moses from ultimately entering the Promised Land.

Compared with other lapses – such as Aaron and the Golden Calf or Moses smashing the 10 Commandments – the indiscretions here in our Torah portion look positively benign.

The 18th century commentator Chaim Luzzato indicates that the ambiguity regarding Moses' sin serves the unfortunate function of implicating our protagonist rather than protecting him, as generations of scholars have tried to fill in the textual void with errors of their own imagination. He writes, "Moses our teacher committed one sin, but our commentators have heaped on him thirteen more, each one having invented a fresh one." And, indeed, Luzzato is not wrong! Maimonides argues that Moses' failing lay in his blazing temper and inability to lead the people in a calm and level-headed way, while Ibn Ezra adds that Moses referred to the Israelites as *morim* – rebels – inappropriately defaming their character.

Ramban explains that Moses displayed a lack of faith in God, as he said before the people "*hamin hasela hazev notzi lachem mayim* – Will we really be able to get water for you from this rock" (Numbers 10:10)? While Rabbenu Hananel of Kairouwan points to the same words and suggests that the problem is rather Moses' use of the first person, plural "we" – making it look as if it were he and Aaron, rather than God alone, who was miraculously delivering the life-quenching liquid. Some commentators even suggest that the text is unclear because Moses' *real* transgression was actually excised from the Biblical record, being too terrible even to mention and omitted so as not to bring shame upon our greatest

prophet. Heaping on sins indeed! Poor Moses has gone from a mere rock-striker to something far, far more nefarious!

As for me, I tend to see this *parasha* less in the vein of Adam Neumann or Elizabeth Holmes – leaders removed from their roles because they had committed terrible, unforgivable acts – and more in the vein of Steve Jobs when he was first ousted from Apple in 1985 – a leader who had simply become ineffective at a particular moment in time and thus needed to be replaced. By this I don't simply mean that I reject the notion that Moses, Heaven forbid, did something truly awful in this episode; in fact, other great leaders including the patriarchs and matriarchs and the infamous King David are presented warts and all so I see no need to mince words here. Rather, when I say that our *parasha* is a modern day Steve Jobs story I mean that it is less a tale of crime and punishment and more a narrative of leadership gone wrong, ultimately leading to a much needed transition. The events of Meribah indicate that Moses is tired and burned-out and no longer quite up to the challenge of serving the Israelite community. It is time for a dramatic change, to be implemented before the people enter the Land of Israel.

On many levels, we shouldn't be surprised that Moses, who led the community so extraordinarily well during the Israelite's escape from Egypt and period of desert wandering, is no longer the right person to bring God's people into the Promised Land. First, it has been nearly 40 years, and difficult ones at that, what with the constant complaining and requests to turn back, the disobedience and rebellions, the deaths along the way of nephews Nadav and Abihu, the thirst, the heat, the tedium of eating just manna. In fact, according to Harvard Law School the average tenure of a CEO at a large-cap company is

just over seven years¹, a little bit longer than the six and a half served by the average college president.² Leadership is hard work, requiring sacrifices of time and energy and tremendous patience, and it can eventually leave individuals depleted. As Moses lost his temper and struck the rock with harsh words, God realized that the intrepid prophet was ready for a much deserved retirement.

Next, we recognize that all leadership is not equal and the unique gifts which Moses so ably demonstrated over the past four decades may not serve him quite as well as the people enter *Eretz Yisrael* (the land of Israel). Moses and Aaron are both known for being men of quiet decency and character – Moses so humble that he does not even see himself as capable of approaching Pharaoh after receiving the Divine call, Aaron said to be *ohav shalom v'rodef shalom*, a lover and pursuer of peace who utters not a word of protest after his beloved sons are taken from him without warning. One can imagine Moses and Aaron's gentle ways being just the thing to soothe the anxious spirits of Israelite slaves during their transition to freedom, to offer encouragement during the long slog through the desert, to inspire generosity and teamwork in the building of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), and to coax compliance with God's new laws given at Sinai. But entering the Promised Land will involve conquest, requiring courage and decisiveness and perhaps a bit of aggression too, qualities far different from those needed in the wilderness years. As Moses and Aaron fell on their faces when confronted with the peoples' complaint, God realized that more confident and assertive leaders would be necessary to bring the Israelite people through their next stage of growth and prosperity.

¹ <https://corpgov.law.harvard.edu/2018/02/12/ceo-tenure-rates/>

² <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Is-College-President-the/243289>

There is a part of me that wishes there might have been a middle road for Moses and Aaron, that even if their tenure was up perhaps they didn't need to die just yet and certainly not before entering the Land of which they'd dreamt all their lives. But, when you think about it, it's not so easy to imagine a different ending to this grand narrative which is all that much more satisfying. For Moses and Aaron to have entered Israel under Joshua's leadership would have felt like a demotion, not to mention the practical challenges it would have created with individuals torn between following the old guard and the new. It's a difficult thing to have a Prophet Emeritus, and particularly at a time of military engagement, clear, hierarchical lines of authority are key.

So what if Moses and Aaron then had entered the Promised Land, still as official leaders of the people but with Joshua's considerable acumen and support to guide them? Here, too, I can imagine much confusion and perhaps even danger as hostile enemies tried to exploit the lack of clear chain of command. And for the Israelites, too, I wonder if this would have been the best way. Part of the enterprise of conquest was becoming independent and self-sufficient, completing the transition from slaves unable to think for themselves to free people tasked with both agency and responsibility. While Moses was the role-model par excellence of obedience and service, the destiny of the Jewish people would ultimately be one of courageous action, the very kind of action exemplified by Joshua. In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "Leadership is a function of time."³ The time had come to move from the quiet grace of Moses to the determined vision of someone new.

³ Covenant and Conversation, p. 266.

So perhaps, then, the story is best as it's written – or almost so. It would have been nice if God simply acknowledged the need for leadership transition in this episode rather than making it look as if Moses and Aaron had done something wrong; it certainly would have prevented the heaping of sins that Luzzatto describes and given our heroes a more fitting march into the night. Yet when their times do come, Aaron in this very *parasha* and Moses at the end of Torah, both prophets are given the respect and honor they so very much deserve, this incident not even mentioned and but a tiny blip in the scope of their long and storied careers. Even thousands of years later they are seen as the gold standard in communal leadership. This one indiscretion does little to impugn their reputation.

And for us? There are many lessons of *Parashat Chukat* still relevant today. Our *parasha* reminds us that people are rarely all good or all bad, that whether it is the greatest or most ordinary amongst us we all have abundant strengths and weaknesses that will come to light in different environments. Our *parasha* also reminds us that no one is perfect, and that excellence lies in accommodating our frailties as gracefully as possible rather than in avoiding them completely. Finally, *Parashat Chukat* reminds us that while leadership transition can be painful and challenging it is also absolutely necessary in order to keep communities vibrant and thriving. We can honor the past while also allowing ourselves to attach to something new. In fact, we must do so in order to ultimately move forward with success!

I can imagine that Moses was indeed sad never to enter the land at which it was his life's work to arrive. It is exceedingly difficult to leave a project half complete! But the community Moses created and the land he moved us towards, the people and the State of Israel, continue to thrive even millennia after his death. This, I can only believe, makes it all worthwhile!

Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi Annie Tucker