

Parashat Hukat

Courage

15 June 2013

Imagine for a moment that you are Moses. You are still reeling from the rebellion of your cousin, Korach – a carefully-manipulated revolt that questioned your integrity as a leader.

Our Torah portion of this Shabbat, Hukat, finds Moses worn down, exhausted, frustrated, irritated by the burdens of leadership which he has assumed for forty years. Liberator, lawgiver, teacher, judge – he has done it all – with the endless complaining of the Israelites ever-echoing in his ears.

And – now on top of all the other “tzoris” – the trouble that seems to envelop him – Moses encounters personal loss. There had been a triumvirate of sorts: Miriam, Aaron and Moses – three siblings forming a powerful political/spiritual family dynasty – that held sway over an entire people on their journey from slavery to freedom. The first one to die is Miriam – and while the Torah is very terse in its

description of her death, it would be understandable to presume that Moses is devastated. After all, Miriam had watched carefully when, as a baby, Moses was plucked from the bulrushes of the Nile. She had intervened with Pharaoh's daughter to insure that Moses would be nursed by his own mother. Later, Miriam led the Israelites in song and dance – nurturing their aesthetic impulse. Even if the Torah does not state so explicitly, Miriam must have been the confidante of her often-beleaguered brother . . . And now, Miriam dies, and Moses is bereft.

It has always seemed to me that there is a direct connection between Moses' bereavement and his reaction to the next episode of dissatisfaction expressed by the Israelites.

What do these “charming folks” say to their leader?

“Why have you brought the Lord's congregation into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die there? Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!”

(Numbers 20:4-5)

Moses has reached his limits. Consumed by his inner pain and unable to really hear God's command carefully, Moses strikes the

rock. For his disobedience, he is summarily punished and told that he will not have the privilege of bringing the Israelites to their destination . . . the Promised Land of milk and honey.

But even more heartache is ahead. The second sibling in the triumvirate, Aaron, also dies. He had been the trusted older brother, partner to Moses in the vision and enactment of the Exodus and renowned for his skill in brokering peace among the contentious Israelites. And now, Aaron, too is gone – and Moses is left alone. Surely, Moses must have thought to himself: “Enough.”

Yet, how does Moses respond? He sends messages to the neighboring kings, indicating that the Israelite march is on – and he presides over the subsequent military victories. He refuses to sink into depression, bitterness or isolation. He does not allow his psychic hurt to define him.

Fast forward to us: Perhaps, we are not tested in quite the same way as Moses was – but everyone of us has baggage – disappointments, frustrations, resentments, hurts, losses -- the inevitable nuts and bolts of life.

Moses reminds us that even when the script is different from what we expected or wanted, attitude counts – and counts heavily.

J.A. Shedd put it aptly: “A ship in harbor is usually safe . . . but that is not what ships are built for” . . . Like Moses, there are always new tasks before us; relationships to be fostered – people to be helped – a community to be strengthened – wisdom and insight to be gained.

Often, those tasks can be daunting – testing our very souls.

How fortunate we are that in our topsy-turvy world – where challenges confront each of us – our Jewish model is Moses – a hero of consummate courage.