



Parashat Hukat – July 9, 2022 – 10 Tammuz 5782

Dear TBE Family and Friends,

If the New York Public Library's suggested reading list is any indication, the summer months are a time when most readers are more likely to find themselves immersed in a lush historical romance or fast-paced murder mystery, rather than the fairly dry discursive text that constitutes so much of Book of Bemidbar (Numbers). That's a bit of a shame, since buried in this week's portion (Parashat Hukat) amidst the rather opaque ritual of the red heifer and the military excursions against Heshbon and Moab is perhaps the most poignant moments in the life of Moshe Rabbeinu (the Prophet Moses), who in the space of a seven-verse vignette reveals the true depths of his greatness as a leader.

The moment comes in the midst of a seemingly prosaic and distinctly inauspicious moment in Moses' career. Now many years along in their journey through the wilderness (or so the rabbis interpret), the Children of Israel are once again complaining that their living conditions are substandard. "Sure we have food," they whine (speaking of the Divinely provided *manna*), "but the meals are tasteless and we don't even have water to drink!"

Moses is at wit's end, he goes with Aaron to the Tent of Meeting and entreats God to intervene, receiving instructions to stand before the people and summon – verbally – water from the dry rocks. Moses hastens back to the camp and, in full view of the assembled masses, raises his staff, intending perhaps to make a grand proclamation as to what is to follow, but in place of the speech, he ends up striking the rock with the staff – eliciting, initially, the intended result. It is only sometime later, when Moses and Aaron are again in private conversation with God that the full consequences of Moses' action are made known. "Because you did not trust me enough to affirm My sanctity in the eyes of the Israelite people ... you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them." (Num 20:12)

That's it. In the space of a single utterance everything that Moses believes that he has been working towards throughout his near forty-year career is taken from him – and for an error that might seem trivial. For most of us it would be a crushing blow, and Moses must, in fact, feel its reverberations profoundly.

But what the text records is not the emotional impact of his sentence. It makes no hint of the transient paralysis but which he was perhaps affected. Rather, the next verse in the Biblical narrative picks up “From Kadesh Moses sent messengers to the king of Edom ...” Moses carries on. He continues to lead the Israelite people, even as he knows that their destiny is no longer his own, that his actions will result in no tangible benefit. Yet he carries forward because he realizes – perhaps he has always realized – that the story that he is playing out is not *his* story, but rather the far larger, far more consequential story of a people, of a vision and a mission that spans generations.

As we in the moment may feel our paths thwarted or our options limited by circumstances beyond our control or, at least, beyond our comprehension. When we face setbacks, individually or communally, may we draw inspiration from the prophetic example of a leader in whose shadow we continue to walk.

Wishing everyone a restful Shabbat,

-- Rabbi Rachel Safman

Note: If you are looking for a more proximate source of inspiration this Shabbat, please join us Saturday morning as Isaac Kaltman is called to the Torah as a bar mitzvah. No personalized invitation is required and the Kaltman and Parrilla families have arranged a lovely kiddush luncheon for those who choose to join us in person. Virtual attendance is also strongly encouraged for those who cannot join us on site. Please use this [link](#).

