

Remember to Hope

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I recently stumbled across a website called Newspaperdeathwatch.com. It's a little site that's interested in the transformation of the media universe from a world of print to the World Wide Web. On the left side of the page is a section called Rest in Peace, which tracks US metropolitan dailies that have closed in the past two years. It's a long and growing list. Among the victims are the:

- Tucson Citizen
- Rocky Mountain News
- Baltimore Examiner
- Kentucky Post
- Union City Register
- Albuquerque Tribune

All gone the way of the dodo bird.

We live in the Information Age. We privilege data above most other resources. A little ironic I guess that our obsession with news has been fed recently by a news story about news itself – the future of the Boston Globe – and whether or not Newspaperdeathwatch.com may be adding another daily to its list one day soon. It bespeaks our unwavering, and sometimes unconscious, need to know well before the headlines appear in the morning paper.

If you want to know the meaning of something – if you want to ascertain a thing's value, one of the tell-tale tests is to examine the reaction it produces. Was it a provocative editorial? Well, what do the letters to the editor say? Is the exhibit worth seeing? Well, how have viewers and critics responded?

So this morning, I'd like to examine three reactions in פרשת בהעלתך that don't seem quite right. The first two are reactions by Moshe Rabbeinu himself. The third is Miriam's reaction.

In the history of the Jewish people in the Torah, we find many episodes where the people complain, where they're disheartened, wayward or even rebellious.

And Moshe's reactions vary with the circumstance:

- He gets angry at the people;
- He falls on his face;
- He gets disheartened;
- He davens.

But something happens in our parsha that is fundamentally different. בני ישראל begin to hunger for meat. They remember the good times in Egypt and complain that they have an almost inhabitable appetite for בשר.

Now – I don't want to say it was right for them to make this request, but on balance, it seems benign enough. Or to put it differently, this request doesn't seem categorically more problematic than anything else the Jewish people complained about in the wilderness. Yet Moshe's reaction seems entirely disproportionate.

במדבר פרק יא

(יד) לא אוכל אנכי לבדי לשאת את כל העם הזה כי כבד ממני:

(טו) ואם ככה את עשה לי הרגני נא הרג אם מצאתי חן בעיניך ואל אראה ברעתי:

It's too much for me, Moshe says. It can't go on this way. Just kill me now.

It's astonishing. Why the melodrama? Why the overreaction? I find it hard to believe that this is simply a last straw. Something big is going on here. What is it?

The second reaction I'd like to call your attention to is almost the opposite. To make a long story short, there are two rogue prophets, Eldad and Medad, who are prophesying in the camp. The gemara says that they are going around saying *משה מת. יהושע מכניס את ישראל לארץ. Moshe is going to die. Yehoshua will be the one to bring the Jewish people into the land.*

Yehoshua up in arms. He takes the prophecy of Eldad and Medad as an affront to Moshe's authority. How can they, he reasons, encroach on the hallowed ground that is Moshe's leadership? He insists that Moshe have them incarcerated forthwith. And yet Moshe is entirely unmoved. *It's fine*, he says. *ומי יתן כל עם ה' נביאים – I wish everyone could be a prophet.*

On the surface, Yehoshua seems to have gotten it right. Respected Jewish leaders are going around the camp prophesying that Moshe is going to die before reaching the land of Israel and Moshe's not outraged? Remember – this is before the sin of the spies. There aren't yet 40 years separating us from entrance into the Promised Land. It's a straight shot. Three days away. In effect, Eldad and Medad are predicting that Moshe will be dead by the day after tomorrow if not before. My question to you is this: How can it be that Moshe is so willing to just let this pass? It's astounding.

Finally, I'm troubled by Miriam. Not so much by the content of what she says as by her timing. We all know the story. She tells *לשון הרע* about Moshe – *why does he have to separate from his wife? We're נביאים too and we manage to have normal family lives. Why can't Moshe do the same?*

The question is: Miriam's timing seems all wrong.

The gemara in Yevamos tells us about the three decisions Moshe made on his own with which God concurred:

- He broke the luchos;
- He added a third day of preparation in advance of revelation;
- And he separated from his wife, Tziporah.

How does the gemara know that Hashem approved of Moshe's decision to separate from his wife? Right after revelation, Hashem tells Moshe:

דברים פרק ה
(כו) לך אמר להם שובו לכם לאהליכם:
(כז) ואתה פה עמד עמדי

Go tell the people to return to their families – but you stay here with me – which Moshe interprets to mean that he's not yet permitted to return to his wife.

So my question to you is this: If Moshe separated from his wife way back at מתן תורה – why did it take so many months for Miriam to lodge this criticism? Moshe's decision wasn't news. So why now? Why here, at the end of פרשת בהעלתך is this the first time we hear a reaction to Moshe's decision?

These are our three questions:

Why Moshe's gross overreaction to the request for meat?

Why Moshe's gross under-reaction to Eldad and Medad?

Why Miriam's mistimed reaction to Moshe's decision to separate from his wife.

Based on a beautiful lecture by Rav Soloveitchik on פרשת בהעלתך, I'd like to suggest the following: You know why these complainers are so devastating for Moshe? You know why he reacts so intensely? Because for Moshe, this episode signals that his indentured servitude to the Jewish people is a lifetime sentence.

In the back of Moshe's mind, there was a secret hope – that when the mission was over – when the people were safely delivered from bondage to freedom; when they had received the Torah and conquered the land – Moshe could once again return to the family he had been momentarily neglecting.

It's true, though under some duress, Moshe accepted the terms of his service. It was his duty and his mission to serve as the leader of the Jewish people. And part of the terms of that contract meant that he couldn't be with his wife and children. That's why we know next to nothing about Moshe's two sons. They're nowhere to be found because that was part of the deal.

But nowhere in the contract did it say that Moshe's term was a lifelong position with no end date. Moshe fully expected that when his job was done, he could go back to being a husband and a father.

What happens in our parsha is that Moshe realizes his dream will never come true. And it's this realization that devastates him.

במדבר פרק יא
(י) וישמע משה את העם בכה למשפחתיו איש לפתח אהלו ויחר אף יקוק מאד ובעיני משה רע:

Notice what Moshe hears: *The people are weeping, each person with his own family.* This is what sets Moshe off. They all have the luxury and comfort of being together with their families. *I, however, am destined to live without mine.*

במדבר פרק יא

(יב) האנכי הריתי את כל העם הזה אם אנכי ילדתיהו כי תאמר אלי שאהו בחיקך כאשר ישא האמן את הינק
על האדמה אשר נשבעת לאבתיו:

Did I conceive all these people, did I bear them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries an infant to the land the You have promised to their fathers?'

I've become their mother, Moshe says. מי יאכילנו בשר – *who will feed us meat*, the people say. They're children who still need to be fed. From this role I will never graduate, Moshe says. And as long as I am beholden to the Jewish people – as long as I am their אומן – I will never be able to return to my family.

It's at this key moment that Moshe arrives at the realization that his great hope is gone. His dream is dashed. He will never be reunited with his wife and sons.

So it's no wonder that he so casually brushes off the prophecy of Eldad and Medad: That Moshe won't make it in to the Promised Land – that he will die as Moshe Rabbeinu and never live to hear his children call him Moshe Avinu. It doesn't bother him because he has resigned himself to the tragic fate he shall never be truly united with his wife and children.

The final reaction we raised becomes quite easy to understand as well. Miriam had said nothing until this point because she too held out hope that Moshe's decision would be a temporary one. She was counting the days until her brother would be able to say *mission accomplished* and return to his family. It's now – in our parsha – when Moshe throws in the towel – when he finally gives up hope – that Miriam reacts. Why, she wonders, why must it be so? Why must Moshe's life in the service of the Jewish people come at the expense of a life devoted to Moshe's own family?

Miriam is punished for the form of her message, not its content. She should have spoken to Moshe directly rather than to her brother, Aharon. But her reaction contains within it something profound: *The notion that a person can never afford to lose hope.*

Why, Moshe? Why must it be this way? Why is it not still possible to hope that things will change? It's hard. It's hard to predict your own emotional future, let alone the emotional future of an entire people. How can you be so sure, though, that they won't come around in time? How can you be so certain that your fathering the children of Israel will always mean that you cannot be a father to your own sons?

It's a lesson Miriam is still teaching us today. In the 21st century, we've become so intent on our need to know, that sometimes we forget about our need to hope.

A close friend of mine introduced me to a beautiful family tradition. After Shabbos, his family gathers round the table in anticipation of havdalah. And before they begin, each person takes a moment to share something they liked about Shabbos and one of their goals for the week. It's a lovely and uplifting way to transition from Shabbos to the days ahead. Perhaps we could add one ingredient to the formula. Perhaps we could also reflect – not only on what we know or what we plan will happen – but on what we hope will happen.

Politically, economically, sociologically – these are trying times. I wish I could stand here and tell you with the certainty of a fact checked and rechecked by a reliable news source that everything will be ok. Unlike the prophets of our parsha, I'm afraid I can't tell what tomorrow will bring. But this is actually precisely the point: For our times call not for more or better or faster information, but rather the willingness to express what Moshe could not: the spirit of hope that tomorrow can indeed bring us one step closer to the fulfillment of our dreams.