

Are Our Leaders G-d?

We know that people have short memories. One of the key questions that gets asked subconsciously is “What have you done for me lately?” The comforting news is that as Ezekiel said “There is nothing new under the sun;” our ancestors were exactly the same way-and we can learn from their example of what not to do.

In his book *The Rational Bible*, Dennis Prager details crises between Moses/God and Israel that arise after Israel crosses the Sea of Reeds. The first is when they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. Prager points out “It took the Israelites a mere three days to lose sight of all the miracles God had performed and to start complaining.” (p. 176) After Moses throws his staff in the water to sweeten it, the second crisis emerges when our ancestors complain about food. They whine, “If only we had died by the hand of G-d in Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread!” (Ex. 16:3)) Prager has a compelling insight there: “It is a myth people yearn most for

freedom. Some people, thank God, do. But many, if not most, people prefer to be taken care of—even at the price of a loss of freedoms—rather than to have to take care of themselves.” (p. 182). So quickly Israel goes from a triumphant people celebrating the Song of the Sea to a nostalgic people with an “exaggerated, idealized picture of the past” (ibid).

The result of the dearth of food is manna raining down from the heavens. Yet God brings manna with a test, instructing Israel to eat their entire portion on the day they receive it as well as that they will receive a double portion of manna on Friday as they will not receive it on Shabbat. Moses and Aaron find this compelling, proclaiming that “by evening you shall know it was God who brought you out of Egypt.” (Ex. 16:6) Will the miracle of the manna do what the plagues could not? Not at all. As Prager points out, “miracles sustain faith for only a brief period” (pg. 184). Israel disobeys Moses twice: “Some of them left some of it until morning and it became infested with maggots and stank” (Ex. 16:20) and “the people went out on the seventh day to gather, but they found

nothing” (16:27). By this point God is furious, proclaiming “How long will you men refuse to obey my commandments and teachings?” (Ex. 16:28).

What’s fascinating to me is the interplay between Moses and God in this week’s reading. First Moses cries out to God to save Israel after they are in danger of being engulfed by Egypt at the Sea of Reeds. God’s retort is “Why are you crying out to me? Speak to Israel and move forward!” (Ex. 14:16). Later on Israel cries to Moses, “Give us water to drink,” and Moses replies “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you try God?” (Ex. 17:2). It is as if “the Israelites do not seem to differentiate between God and Moses; they demand that Moses, not God, provide them with water.” On one hand this should not surprise us, as Pharaoh viewed himself as a God, so Israel is used to viewing themselves as God. God has already placed Moses in the role of God (elohim) to Pharaoh. On the other hand Moses fears Israel asking God “What shall I do with this people? Before long they will be stoning me!”

(Ex. 17:4). It is as if Moses is not comfortable with his role as the representation of God before Israel.

I think of how as a man of faith and the one viewed as God's emissary this interplay works out. In rabbinical school I heard a story about a man whose wife was very ill. The rabbi came in for a bikkur holim visit. The husband shouted out, "Rabbi-we're not ready for you yet!" It is as if the rabbi was God's escort (or for a more negative reading the Angel of Death), bringing the woman up to heaven. How often are the leaders of the Jewish community viewed as God-like? Moses might have felt like he was just a man but that's not how he was viewed by the people.

As we celebrate Jake's Men's Club Shabbat, let us bless the leaders of our Men's Club representing that while they might feel they don't do much, they do a great deal to sustain the Jericho Jewish Center. Let us thank Michael Cohen who tirelessly organizes the service leaders, Torah and Haftarah readers year after year; Dan Krieger who does all the behind-the-scenes work to make Jake's Mens Club operational and Jake Jacobson in abstentia

who is the face of the Men's Club just like Moses was the face of the Jewish people. We are so grateful to be able to celebrate together with you at Shabbat Shirah and demonstrate by example the power of Jake's Mens Club. When we (God forbid) have a short memory and think "What has JJC done for me lately?" let us remember this special Shabbat and give thanks to our leadership for making it possible.