

1956. The Suez crisis. A turbulent time. Relations between the United States and Israel are tense. A meeting is held between the president of the United States and the president of Israel. The president of the United States wishes to reinforce the awesome power of his office and his country. He says to the president of Israel, "Mr. President, I am the president of 150 million Americans. You are the president of 750,000 Jews." The president of Israel responds, "Mr. President, you are the president of 150 million Americans. I am the president of 750,000 presidents."

We turn to another turbulent time. A time of tension. A time when trepidations are great, fear is in the air, leadership is on everyone's mind. A time when attention is focused on two individuals, individuals of significance and renown, individuals whose capacity to lead is at the forefront of everyone's mind. Obviously I refer...to 3,500 years ago. Moses' leadership of the people was coming to an end. Joshua was to succeed him.

Our history is filled with great leaders — Abraham, Joseph, King David and King Solomon. No one held a candle to Moses. He liberated our ancestors from Egypt; he kept them together through forty years in the desert, and on the shores of the Jordan River he handed them off to Joshua, whole, committed and eager. Moses warded off enemy armies, confronted Israelite rebels, handled shortages of food and water, and perhaps most significantly, never gave up on this people that complained, complained, complained.

Who was this person, this man Moses, this leader without parallel? What can he teach us about leadership?

The Torah tells us little about him as a person but the rabbis of the Talmud fill in some of the blanks. Moses tended flocks for his father-in-law, Jethro. One particularly hot day, a lamb ran off. Moses chased after him. When he finally found the lamb, it was drinking eagerly from a spring. Moses said, "Little lamb, you ran away because you were thirsty! You must be exhausted. Let me carry you back to the flock." Seeing this, God said, "Since you have such compassion on this lost lamb, I know I can entrust you with My flock...the people of Israel."

In Egypt, Pharaoh ordered heavy burdens placed upon the women and lighter burdens placed upon the men. Moses wandered among his people, switching the burdens, telling the taskmasters he was actually helping Pharaoh by making the work more efficient. This was dangerous, and he risked Pharaoh's wrath again when he said directly to him, "if a man has a slave and that slave does not have a day to rest each week, that slave will die." The Midrash tells us Pharaoh gave Shabbat back to the slaves.

Moses repeatedly tells us to take care of the widow, the orphan and the stranger in our midst. He wants us to understand this as deeply as we can because, as we discussed last week, we "were strangers in Egypt." We are not to be compassionate because it is the right thing to do or even just because it is commanded. Compassion, he taught, arises from the deepest feeling we can have toward another, that of understanding from within.

A leader has compassion.

In the book of Numbers we encounter a passage in which Aaron and Miriam, Moses' brother and sister, become jealous of Moses. They grumble that he has been putting on airs and minimizing their contributions to the cause. God squelches this mini rebellion quickly, and the Torah tells us in language that could not be any plainer, "Moses was a very humble person, more humble than any person on earth." This might surprise us. We do not necessarily think of humility as a necessary condition of leadership; we could argue that the kind of personality an effective leader needs could be impeded by humility. The Torah disagrees. A strong effective leader, it says, not only can be humble, but must be.

The first time Moses comes down the mountain with the tablets of the law in his hands, he sees the Israelites dancing around the Golden Calf, the idol they insisted Moses' feckless brother make, since they believe Adonai has abandoned them. Moses sees this, flies into a rage and hurls the tablets to the ground; they shatter into a million pieces. He burns the idol, stirs its ashes into a pot of water, and as a punishment makes the people drink the better brew.

God is even more outraged. Up on the mountain, he had told Moses what was transpiring below and made this offer: "let my anger blaze forth against them that I may destroy them and make of you a great nation." What an offer. To start

all over again, with this new people solely the line of Moses. An offer he could not turn down. But he did. Could he be sure this new people would be better, or more deserving, than the old people? And who was he to think that he was better than any of them below?

A leader is humble.

Shortly after, the Israelites began to build the Tabernacle, the beautiful, portable sanctuary the people would carry with them in the desert. When it was set up, each of the tribes brought offerings. Usually, we focus on the most gripping narratives in the Torah. Here's one of the most soporific:

*“And he that offered his offering the first day was Nahshon the son of Amminadab, of the tribe of Judah: And his offering was one silver charger, the weight thereof was an hundred and thirty shekels, one silver bowl of seventy shekels, after the shekel of the sanctuary; both of them were full of fine flour mingled with oil for a meat offering: One spoon of ten shekels of gold, full of incense: One young bullock, one ram, one lamb of the first year, for a burnt offering: One kid of the goats for a sin offering: And for a sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five he goats, five lambs of the first year: this was the offering of Nahshon the son of Amminadab.”*

This goes on for nearly one hundred verses, tribe by tribe, detailing what each of the tribes brought to Moses as he noted that gift down. Why this detail?

The sages, of course, had an answer. So the people would trust Moses. So they would know he had...integrity. It is hard to imagine that they did not already trust him, but what kind of statement did it make that Moses, sitting there receiving shekels and shekels of gold and silver, precious stones and other valuables, not that anyone would have suspected him of cheating...what does it say that he, Moses, kept track of every gift, and the amounts were posted publicly for all to see.

Caesar said of his wife Pompeia, “Caesar’s wife should be beyond suspicion.” Moses knew it was not enough for him to have clean hands. He must be above suspicion.

The rabbis took this one step further, explaining that whenever Moses came in contact with currency of any kind, like when he collected the half shekel tax, he

wore a special garment that he wore only on those occasions. What made that garment special? One feature. It had no pockets. Beyond reproach.

A leader has integrity.

There is a moment when Moses struggles. The weight of the work is too great. He cannot keep up with the demands of the people; he cannot keep track of all he is to oversee. He grows frantic. God suggests he gather seventy elders, “with whom you have experience and respect,” to work with him. Moses sees the merit and does as God recommends. Moses listens.

Now it is one thing when God makes a suggestion. But when a suggestion comes from another mortal?

The Torah gives us few insights into Moses’ relationships with others. He loved his wife Tziporah, and his sons, Gershom and Eliezer. His ties with his siblings were complex. But his relationship with his father-in-law, Jethro, is intriguing. Jethro is his former employer. Jethro is a Midianite. Jethro is his...father-in-law!

Nonetheless, when Jethro suggests Moses set up a network of judges to help in ruling the people, so Moses can concentrate only the large matters, Moses sees the light. He does as Jethro suggests. It works. Things become easier. He becomes a more effective leader.

It does not surprise us that Moses listened to God; it may surprise us that Moses, chosen by God, would listen to other people, let alone those of another tribe. Moses was smart enough to know he had no monopoly on wisdom.

Being a leader means you don’t have all the answers. Being a leader means you listen to others.

When God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, Moses first thought God was speaking about someone else. He did not think he was worthy of such an assignment, and the Torah makes it clear, he did not want to do it. He was a most reluctant prophet.

But he did what God asked. He kissed his wife and sons goodbye, and went on that long, long journey back to Egypt. What must it have been like for him, going back to Egypt. From Pharaoh on down, all Egypt now knew who he was, knew what he had done, knew that he was a fraud. Had Pharaoh been waiting for him, sword in hand...would that have been a surprise? For Moses to return to Egypt, it took courage.

A leader needs courage. Moses demonstrated unyielding courage by returning to Egypt, but that was only the beginning.

While in Egypt, things do not go as he was told they would. He believes God misled him. He is angry at God. He confronts God. "Oh Lord, why have you done evil to this people, and why have you sent me? From the time I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name he did more evil to this people, and You did not yet rescue Your people"

He is being accusatory, he is being confrontational, he is being outright hostile...to God! He gets up and stands toe to toe with the creator he knows could squash him like a fly. His courage is palpable and not for his own sake, but for that of his people. You have not been fair to them. He must have been beyond scared when it came to standing up for an injustice done his people he got in the face of whomever he needed to...even God.

A leader has courage.

The Torah is filled with contradictions. Centuries of rabbis and teachers have struggled to resolve them. As it happens, on this bimah Saturday morning, as Alexis Kerven read from the Torah, we heard one of the most challenging contradictions of all.

God told Moses a long time ago that he, Moses, would not cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. On one occasion, Moses had not merely raised his staff above a rock at the spring of Meribah, as God had instructed, but hit the rock. Because of that, God said, Moses would see, but not enter, the Promised Land.

Now, at the beginning of Parashat Vayelech, the end of the Torah, Moses speaks to the people: "I am now one hundred and twenty years old, I can no longer be active. Moreover, the Lord said to me, 'You shall not go across yonder Jordan.' The Lord will cross over with you, as he promised you. Be strong and resolute, the God of your fathers is with you."

"I'm not up to the job anymore. God has told me anyway that it's my time. But don't worry, God will be with you."

"I'm not up to the job anymore." We learned earlier that Moses isn't crossing the river, because God said he isn't. So why does he state that he is no longer physically capable of leadership? He wants the people to think it is his idea. He wants them to direct their disappointment, even their anger, at him...not God. If they are to fulfill their destiny, they cannot do it with a God at whom they are

angry. Moses may well have realized that it was time for a new leader, he wasn't young, settling in the Promised Land would present new challenges. But the people wouldn't get that.

"God has told me anyway that it's my time." That's true. God did tell him that. But Moses does not tell the people why God made that decision. Had he, we can imagine their reaction. "What? Because of something you did wrong with stick in your hand? God will not allow us to continue with you, the leader in whom we have absolute trust, forty years in the making, because of something he did with a stick?"

Again Moses intercedes. Again, he prevents them from becoming angry at God. And still, this reason is ancillary to the key one Moses offers: he is old and infirm.

But there's a problem. Moses may have been old but he was by no means infirm. In the final chapter of the Torah we read, "No one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated."

There is only one explanation. Moses lied.

We can imagine how Moses. "I can't go into the Promised Land? After forty years of this people, their complaining and their sniveling, a job I never wanted in the first place, and the one good thing about it, reaching our destination, feeling the sand between my toes of our land, at least being there for however short a time...and I can't?"

Moses' emotions must have been strong. But he kept them in check. Because he knew. Despite it being a job he didn't want. Despite forty years of aggravation from within and danger from without, he kept his emotions in check. Because he knew. It wasn't about him. It was about the people. It was about what was best for them. That was all that mattered.

He had feelings and desires and yearnings just like the rest of us. But he was the leader of the people, and whether he liked it or not, part of that sacred trust was that every action he took had to be in their best interest, not his. Every action...including his last.

A leader is selfless.

Moses was not perfect. And the Torah did not hide his imperfections. His speech was unclear, his temper occasionally short, his interpersonal skill lacking. None of that kept him from being the greatest leader we have known.

Compassion. Humility. Integrity. Valuing others. Courage. Selflessness.

The Torah ends with the words, “never again did there arise a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord singled out, face to face.” Another Moses does not appear to be in the cards. And that is sad. But may we at least be blessed with leaders, who strive to be like him.