

Rising to Our Role

In this week's Torah portion, *Korach*, rebellion ensues. With the decree that the generation of the desert wander aimlessly for forty years so they die out in the diaspora, the community becomes restless and resentful. Another Levite, Korach, with his band of followers, vie with Moses and Aaron for leadership. As we saw in last week's portion, Moshe collapses in the face of the spies' critique. While Moses is determined in his defense of the people before God, Moses is silent before the people when we might expect a response.

Yet, after falling on his face, Moshe regains his composure and rebuts Korach's critique: "*Does it seem too small a thing to you that God separated you...to do the service...of the Lord? For what cause do you and your company gather against the Lord; and what is Aaron that you murmur against him? And Moses was very angry...*" (Numbers 16:9-15) What happened? Why in one instance - facing the spies - does Moshe shy away from conflict and yet, in a second similar attack, Moshe stands his ground?

If we recall another incident from a number of portions ago, *Beha'alotcha*, Moshe is critiqued on two fronts by his siblings, Aaron and Miriam: first, for his personal choice to marry Tzipora. And, second, they snicker about Moshe's status as a prophet: "Has God spoken only by Moses? Hasn't He spoken by us too? (ibid 12:1-2) The Torah, then, makes an editorial comment: "Moses was more humble than any man on the face of the earth." (ibid, 3) And God suddenly appears before Aaron and Miriam and scorns their irreverence of God's chosen prophet, the one with whom He spoke face to face.

Moshe's humility would not allow him to respond to his siblings' attack; it was, after all, an critique on his person. But in the same breath, they attacked his status as prophet of God. Moshe is not merely an elected leader; Moshe is God's elect. He is the channel through which the revelation of the Torah and divinity were able to pass. To challenge Moshe is to challenge the validity of the transmission. Maimonides articulates the belief in the prophecy of Moshe as the paramount form of prophetic experience, surpassed by *none*, now and forever. This is an article of Jewish faith. Were we not to believe such a thing, another prophet could rise and subvert the word of God and the teachings of the Torah. (See Maimonides', Comments to Mishna, *Perek Chelek*, Foundation #7)

Perhaps this dual nature was at play in Moshe when he was challenged by Korach. On the one hand, Moshe fell to the ground, unable to reply, stunned into silence by his humility. There was a fleeting thought: maybe I *should* step aside. Why am I raised above the community? After all, everyone in the congregation, as Korach argued, is holy. (ibid, 16:3) But then Moshe's silence gave way to a loud, forceful protest. Korach was not simply challenging Moshe's person; he was challenging Moshe's station.

When God appoints Moshe as the leader to redeem the Jews from Egypt, Moshe felt ill-equipped for the mission. Moshe argued that he could not speak; he was of heavy mouth and heavy tongue. But God answered Moshe: "Who gives man the mouth to speak? I will be your mouth and I will teach you the words." (Exodus 4:11-12) Moshe's personal deficiencies and shortcomings are insignificant next to enormity of his mission. Ideally, our leaders' personal lives will be harmonious with the roles they must assume. But, to paraphrase Voltaire, perfection cannot be the enemy of the good.

We all fill our own, particular station: parent, child, sibling, spouse, employee, employer, teacher, student, rabbi and friend. In all of these roles, our personality is not identical with the role we play. If we ignore the limitations of our person, our rise to our role can be unlimited.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach,
Rabbi Menashe Fast