

PARASHAS CHUKAS

Leadership Qualities

He brought down the wrath of Heaven on Egypt until Pharaoh agreed to let the Jewish people go. He led them out to freedom. He parted the sea and led them through. He brought them to the foot of Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. He guided them through the desert for forty years. But at the last moment, when they stood poised on the threshold of the Promised Land, his leadership came to an end. Moses passed away without stepping a foot into the Promised Land.

Why wasn't Moses granted the privilege of entering the Promised Land to which he had labored so diligently to bring the people?

We find the answer in this week's Torah portion. After Miriam died, the miraculous well from which the people had slaked their thirst in the desert vanished, and they were left without water. They maligned Moses for taking them from the gardens of Egypt into an arid wasteland. Hashem told Moses to assemble the people and speak to the rock, which would then give forth water. Moses called the people together. "Listen, you rebels," he declared angrily. "Can water come out of this rock?" Then he struck the rock with his staff and water flowed. But Moses had erred. Instead of speaking to the rock, he had struck it. And for this, Hashem decreed that Moses would not enter the Promised Land.

Let us now look for a moment at the Torah reading of Devarim, where Moses is reviewing the events of the previous forty years in his parting words to the Jewish people. He reminds them of how the people had responded to the slanders spread by the spies upon their return from the land of Canaan, and how Hashem had decreed that the entire generation would die in the desert and only their children would enter the Promised Land. "Hashem was also infuriated with me because of you," Moses concluded, "saying, 'You too will not arrive there.'" It would seem, therefore, that Moses was barred from entering the Promised Land because of the sin of the spies, not because of the sin of striking the rock. How do we account for this apparent contradiction?

The commentators explain that Moses had originally been exempt from the decree barring the Jewish people from entering the Promised Land because of the sins of the spies. As a leader of the Jewish people, he was in a class by himself. He was not integrated into the body of the common people. He was not driven by their motivations or influenced by their social currents. Although he was always sensitive to their needs,

his thoughts, convictions and motivations were never controlled by the ebb and flow of public opinion. Therefore, since he was not really one of them, he did not have to share the unfortunate fate of the people when they erred and sinned.

But at the incident of the rock, Moses lost his imperviousness to public opinion. No longer aloof and remote in his decision making, he flared at the Jewish people. "Listen, you rebels!" he cried in anger. He allowed the people to get to him, and as a result, he struck the rock instead of speaking to it, in disobedience of Hashem's command. Therefore, he no longer deserved to be considered in a class by himself, and he shared the fate of the people who were barred from the Promised land because of the sin of the spies.

A man once asked a great sage for his opinion of some popular political leaders.

"They are like dogs," he replied.

The man was puzzled. "Like dogs? Why?"

"Very simple," said the great sage. "When a man walks down the street with his dog, the dog always runs ahead, yapping excitedly. But when he gets to the corner, he doesn't know which way to turn. So he stands and waits for his master to catch up. Once his master chooses the new direction, the dogs is off and running once again. These leaders you mentioned have no opinions or convictions of their own. They sniff the air to discover in which direction the wind is blowing, and then they are off and running. Some leaders!"

In our own lives, we are called upon to act as leaders, whether in the broader community, our immediate circles or simply in our own families for our children. Everything we do sets an example for others and influences them at least to some extent. But in order to be true leaders, we must have the courage and integrity to follow our own convictions. We must have the fortitude to live spiritually rather than cave in to the pressure of the fashionable materialistic trends. Despite the decadence of our society, or perhaps because of it, there is a latent thirst for spirituality among the people around us. If we live by our convictions, we can have a part in bringing that thirst into the open and literally change the world.