

## Trials of Leadership

*“<sup>9</sup> So let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we don’t give up” (Gal 6:9, TLV).  
“<sup>13</sup> But as for you, brothers, do not grow weary of doing good” (1 Thess. 3:13).*

All men and women are called into some sort of leadership. You are a leader whether you are a father, or a husband, or in the military, or in any sort of managerial position in your employment. Similarly, you are a leader whether you are a mother, or a widow, or in any sort of managerial position in your employment. In fact, you are a leader if you are a single mom or dad. Some of us were prepared for the calling of leadership and looked forward to its challenges, but some of us found ourselves leading without any planning or training. In whatever type of leadership we are in, there are unique tests and trials that accompany that leadership role. This week’s *Torah* reading contains one of the most compelling examples of trials associated with leadership.

*Parashat Chukat* was Ian’s and my *Bar Mitzvah* reading in July of 1997. Each time I re-read these verses I am reminded of the difficulties of leadership and the importance of a proper response to these trials. Firstly, as we read in Numbers 20 we see that the entire community gathered together not to bless but to complaint to Moses and Aaron *one more time*. This are always tests in leadership – the ones being led tend to be prone to complaint. Why is it so hard to be thankful for the good things the Almighty has already accomplished in our leadership? He has provided godly leaders, and He has brought us out of the land of Egypt (the carnal world) and the land of sinfulness. He told us to: *“honor our father and mother”* (our inherent leaders, e.g., Ex. 20:12, Deut. 5:16, Eph. 6:2) In doing so we will have a *more* abundant life. We have all been on one side or the other of this trial (complaining as children and/or adults, or both). This is a difficult trial and one that requires a godly response.

The second trial is associated with the onset of a real need (water, clothing, food, etc.) Here the ones being led often do not turn to the Lord to pray and expect His Provision. Instead, the Children of Israel looked back at the land of slavery (Egypt) through rose-colored lenses. Rather than seeing Egypt as the 430-year-long place of slavery, they saw Egypt as the place where the real need of water, for example, was plentiful. But the Lord had already demonstrated He could bring more than enough water in the desert (as we saw in Exodus). Sometimes the ones being led forget the reality of their former situation. Often in the process of improving their situation leaders make decisions that bring changes in such a way that those being led tend to complaint about what they had before (great friends, school, neighborhood, etc.) It is very difficult for a leader to receive these complaints because if appropriate time were given some if not all of these negative assessments would be totally gone and replaced with much better outcomes. Why are we so prone to want to return to slavery?

A third trial is when those being led fail to see the *current* state of blessing. Often a leader immediately experiences blessings but those being led do not (yet). In the *Torah* reading the Children of Israel did not see their deliverance from Egypt as a worthy blessing, they only saw a current curse (no figs, grapes, pomegranates or water). This is different from complaining about things that they have which are not as good (e.g., friends, neighborhood, school) but rather complaining about those things that you do not yet have as if they would never be available again. The Promised Land will have all those things in abundance, but they did not see it.

A fourth trial is when those being led look to the leader as the ultimate provider instead of looking to the Lord for provision. The Children of Israel complained against the men whom the Almighty had placed as leaders over them. But the fact was that neither Moses nor Aaron acted on his own accord. Was it not the Lord who was ultimately leading the people? Often leaders make decisions that they themselves are not responsible for in their own accord. Sometimes leaders make decisions based on someone else’s direction (e.g., the company shut down and everyone had to move).

The Children of Israel had arrived at *Kadesh* (the same Hebrew root as *kadosh*) and their reactions and responses were not good at the “holy place.” As I meditated on today’s Word, I am aware that as a leader or as a follower I have not always reacted and responded to life’s uncertainties and challenges in good ways. In fact, I

concluded that I have often (in my 40 years as a Believer) reacted in very similar negative ways. Therefore, Scripture does show me how much of a complainer I can be.

My heart is broken when I read what the Lord said to Moses: *“Because you did not trust in Me so as to esteem Me as holy in the eyes of Bnei-Yisrael...”* (Nu. 20:12a) Moses got angry and the ultimate consequence was that he lost his chance to enter the Promised Land. This time the leader reacted to the complaints of his followers in an angry way (unlike when he interceded for them not to be eliminated after the Golden Calf incident). The truth is that when we fail to demonstrate faith (trust) in God it affects those around us because our actions diminish everyone’s understanding of who God really is. We make God seem weak and ineffective and much more so in the eyes of those that are being led. God is Holy and He is to be sanctified (separated) in everyone’s eyes. Can we, in whatever type of leadership we are in, afford to minimize Him as God? No!

When I hear statements like “what have you done lately” I get upset in that inherently I want to say something like “I have a good track record” so “judge me on the whole and not on my latest.” Should someone be elected to the All Star Game if he was really good three years ago or even last year but is mediocre this year? Of course not! What I do not realize often is that I could have been above reproach all my life but if all of a sudden I do something wrong like commit murder, for example, am I not a murderer now no matter what my track record was before? Why is that? It is because the last action was grave and significant enough to cancel the track record. Thus, the real problem is ultimately that I am failing to correctly impute the appropriate gravity to this last action. Making God look stupid in front of the Children of Israel (in anger Moses (and Aaron) took the matter into their own authority) by saying: *“Listen now, you rebels! Must we bring you water from this rock?”* (Nu. 20:10b) and since water did gush out, did they not usurp the Almighty’s Power as their own? The statement *“must we bring you water”* demonstrates that (in anger) Moses (and Aaron) appropriated God’s Power and Authority as their own. This is a grave sin indeed because God was forced to follow up on what He said He would do (bring water from the rock, which He said He would, then did it because He is absolutely reliable) but with the credit commandeered by Moses (and Aaron).

The Bible states: *“<sup>17</sup> For it is better to suffer for doing good (if it is God’s will) than for doing evil”* (1 Pet 3:17). Thus as the leaders that we all are, we are to take reacting in anger to our complaining followers as something we absolutely **cannot** afford to do. What a fitting ending to the *Torah* Portion read in today’s *Torah* Service: *“<sup>13</sup> These are the waters of Meribah where Bnei-Yisrael contended with Moses, and where Adonai showed Himself holy among them”* It is hard for me to imagine a sadder statement being spoken about our leadership.