"*Vayyeilech*: Was Moses a failed leader?"

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

Our sidrah opens at the point where Moses, sensing that his end is near, sets out to prepare the nation for his passing and for a new leadership and reality:

> *And Moses went [around] and spoke these words to all Israel, saying, "I am one hundred and twenty today, and can no longer be active. Moreover, the Lord has said to me, "you shall not pass over this Jordan." The Lord your God will pass over before you; He will destroy these nations from before you, and you shall dispossess them. Joshua is the one who shall cross over before you, as the Lord has spoken"* (Deut. 31:1-3).

One might have expected a spontaneous outpouring of grief at his words, or at least some tears and words of tribute and appreciation from the nation for all that their leader had done for them, notably for having brought them safely to the very borders of the Promised Land! Perhaps even pleas to God to grant him a pardon and to allow him to lead them into Israel, but no; not a word escapes their lips.

It is not as if they had expected him to live among them in retirement for a few more years so that they would have plenty of time to organise an appropriate farewell. At the very outset of the fortieth year in the desert Moses reveals to them how his appeal on that score had failed:

> *I pleaded with God (Va'etchanan el Hashem) at that time, saying, "Lord, God, You have now begun to show Your servant Your greatness and Your strong hand…so let me pass over, I pray You, that I may see the goodly land which is across the Jordan, that goodly hill country and the Lebanon." But the Lord was most displeased with me on your account and would not listen to me. The Lord said to me, "Enough! Never speak to me again on this matter. Go up to the summit of Pisgah and gaze about, to the west, the north, the south and the east. Look at it well, for you shall not go across the Jordan. Give Joshua his instructions…"* (Deut. 3: 23-28).

They would truly never have been under any illusions that their leader's mission would have gone beyond the 40 years that they themselves had been doomed to remain in the desert. For, after ten of the spies returned with an evil report of the land, which the gullible nation believed, they were all told clearly that their punishment was to be a delay in the desert of a

year for every day the spies had been away on their ill-fated mission (Nu. 14:34). So they knew precisely that their leader was about to bid farewell to life!

Furthermore, his language should also have indicated that his days were numbered, and his mission was coming to an end. Note how frequently he mentions in his final address that there were certain things that they must remember to attend to 'when you pass over the Jordan' (27: 1-2; 3, 4, 12). So, should they not have 'twigged' and organised a special farewell assembly in his honour?

But they left it too late; and it was only after he had died and been buried by God that they 'did the right thing': *And the children of Israel wept for Moses in the Plains of Moab for thirty days* (34:8). It was clearly a formal mourning ritual, but of a much shorter duration than they had witnessed – and possibly been constrained to observe - in Egypt after the death of a pharaoh. That occurrence was followed by 70 days of national mourning during which 'normal life came to an abrupt halt. During that period no one was allowed to drink wine, eat meat, bathe, conduct sacrifices or have sex. People were expected to weep openly in the streets to express their sorrow' (Christina Riggs, *Encycl. of Egyptology*, 2010). So, the description of the reaction of the people to the death of Moses suggests that it was a similarly stylised, rather than a spontaneous, response, not one expressive of an authentic and profound sense of loss, sorrow, and gratitude.

It was similarly ironic that Moses – the leader who, throughout his life, was in constant dialogue with God, with Pharaoh, priests, princes, elders, litigants, and ordinary Israelites - was buried in silence, the location of his grave unknown, the honour due to him, withheld. This is strangely reminiscent of the ancient Egyptian practice wherein the first thing new pharaohs invariably did on ascending the throne was to have the name of their predecessor erased from all the monuments in the empire and replaced with their own (Riggs). [This may

offer some perspective on the verse, *A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.* Of course, he would have known him, or all about him; but, as was the royal norm, he didn't *want* to know, or to acknowledge the great benefits Joseph had brought to the country.]

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> *The Lord said to Moses: The time is drawing near for you to die. Call Joshua and present yourselves in the Tent of Meeting that I may instruct him* (Deut. 31:14).

This speedy transition from Moses' leadership to Joshua's accession could well be construed as exemplifying the maxim, 'the king is dead; long live the king!', which might be deemed a diminution of Moses' unique status, given that he had dedicated his every living moment to the leadership of Israel and to persuading a recalcitrant Israel to embrace the service of God! So, are we being led to the conclusion that Moses was a failure as a leader and as a man?

Before we jump to that conclusion there are some things to consider. First, that God does not bestow compliments lightly. So, when he asserted that Moses was 'the humblest of men on earth' (Nu. 12:3), we may take it for granted that, not only would assertions of praise and tribute on the part of the nation have truly embarrassed him, but also that he would have recoiled at the thought that his final resting-place might become a place of pilgrimage. He would have been more than content, therefore, to have been buried by God in a place unknown to man.

It is also pertinent to mention that the nature of Moses' character and calling inevitably meant that he was not someone that the ordinary Israelite could identify with or fraternise with. He was forever an enigma; someone who had appeared out of the blue to assume leadership of the Israelites and to speak and make demands of them in the name of the unseen God. In that

situation, who wouldn't have feared - and who would have trusted – a stranger who demanded that they exchange a settled, albeit harsh, life in Egypt for a journey into the unknown, through fierce desert terrain? [In the first half of the 20th century, it was a very small proportion of Jews – other than refugees from persecution and the Holocaust – who were prepared to make their way to Israel to become chalutzim; to drain the swamps and suffer the hardships of a pioneering life surrounded by hostile foes?]

And even when they left Egypt, many would have had doubts that God really did speak to him face to face?' They would certainly have been mystified by the fact that, notwithstanding the many miracles that were wrought on their behalf, there were still so many situations that he seemed incapable of resolving and so many occasions when he was manifestly unable to cope. And how could they have made sense of the fact that God's chosen messenger disregards His instruction - to speak to the rock - and is so severely punished that he has to forfeit his life's ambition?

At the personal level he was also hardly knowable. He was surrounded by an impregnable hierarchy of officialdom: Aaron, the elders, the priests, the judiciary, tribal princes, officials overseeing each unit of a thousand people, subsidiary officials monitoring each hundred, and minor officials servicing each fifty within it, and even each ten. His tent was placed at a distance from those of the tribes; and even if someone happened to come across Moses unexpectedly while walking within the camp, they would have been deterred by his entourage, or by his less-than-welcoming face, shining unnaturally with a spiritual aura, inevitably visible as a halo around the makeshift mask he wore. How could they possibly have cemented any meaningful relationship with such a man? So, perhaps it wasn't so surprising that they were unable to express their feelings for him in any eulogy!

So, we return to our question: Was Moses a failure, then, as a leader and as a man?

If we read the finale to our sidrah we might incline to the conclusion that he was:

> *When Moses had put down in writing the words of this Teaching to the very end, Moses charged the Levites who carried the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, saying: Take this book of Teaching and place it beside the Ark…and let it remain there as a witness against you. Well I know how defiant and stiff-necked you are. If now, while I am still alive in your midst you have been defiant toward the Lord, how much more then, when I am dead!...For I know that, when I am dead, you will act wickedly and turn away from the path that I enjoined upon you, and that in time to come, misfortune will befall you for having done evil in the sight of the Lord and vexed Him by your deeds (Deut. 31: 24-29).*

Hardly something to include on your CV, Mosheh! Yet, it was not Moses, but God, who first designated Israel as 'a stiff-necked people' after their act of apostasy in worshipping the Golden Calf (See Ex. 32:9). God subsequently tells Moses that He will not be with the nation when they go into Canaan, 'since you are a stiff-necked people' (33:3), and this is followed up by further plea by Moses that God should indeed accompany them into Israel, 'even though they are a stiff-necked people' (v. 9). So, the truth was that the failure was not that of Moses' leadership, but of the stubbornness, ingratitude, and lack of faith on the part of the nation. You can bring a horse to water…

For Moses, however, that unfortunate character trait was never a barrier to his passionate commitment to promote Israel's welfare and to secure God's forgiveness at all times, even for its worst acts of waywardness and disloyalty. He taught us the true meaning of *ahavat Yisrael*. To love a lovable person is easy. To love someone with character traits that run counter to your own beliefs and sense of loyalty and propriety is the greatest challenge.

Indeed, the true character of Moses, and his unswerving love for Israel, comes to the fore in the verse immediately following his sad warning to the people that, *I know that,*

when I am dead, you will act wickedly and turn away from the path that I enjoined upon you, and that in time to come, misfortune will befall you for having done evil in the sight of the Lord and vexed Him by your deeds (Deut. 31: 24-29).The next verse states: *Then Moses recited the words of this song (shirah) to the very end, in the hearing of the whole congregation of Israel.*

Moses ended his life singing to the people he nurtured and loved a song about the God he loved:

The Rock! – His deeds are perfect;
All His ways are just;
A faithful God, never false,
True and upright is He.
(Deut. 32:4)

But, as a man of truth, fixated by the disloyalty of Israel to its God, the song proceeds primarily to address and denounce that disloyalty. Moses is described as *Ish ha-Elokim*, 'the man of God' (33:1); and, in the *Ha'azinu* Song, although it is Moses' song, it moves seamlessly into a divinely-uttered critique of the nation.

Then, in the final sidrah of the Torah, setting his criticisms apart, Moses bestows a fulsome blessing of each of the tribes - again in song – in words suffused with love, pride, and tribute.

Moses was far from being a failed leader. He was rather like a father, knowing when to be gentle and when to be firm; when to chastise and when to be indulgent; when to clutch hold of the child out of fear it might stumble; and when to give it free rein to face the world's harsh realities and to emerge all the stronger.

Shabbat shalom uGemar tov,
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