

kol chovevei TORAH

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Keeping the Ego in Check

By Rabbi Avi Weiss

In this week's portion Moses is told that he would not enter Israel because he hit the rock instead of speaking to it. Immediately afterwards, Moses sends a delegation to Edom asking that the Jewish people be allowed to go through his territory on their way to Israel. (Numbers 20:14)

Commenting on this juxtaposition the Midrash states: In the usual way, when a man is slighted by his business partner, he wishes to have nothing to do with him; whereas Moses, though he was punished on account of Israel, did not rid himself of their burden, but sent messengers. (Bamidbar Rabbah 19:7)

Nehama Leibowitz reinforces this idea by noting that the text states that Moses sent the delegation to Edom from Kadesh. This fact is unnecessary. In the words of Leibowitz: Wherever no change of locale is recorded in the text, it is presumed that the event described took place at the last mentioned place. Obviously, Nehama concludes, Kadesh is mentioned again to emphasize Moses' adherence to his mission of bringing the people to the land even after his rebuff, in spite of the fact that he had been explicitly excluded from it.

An important lesson may be learned here. Leaders must be careful to subdue their ego. The cause is larger than the personal concerns of any one person. Although Moses is condemned to die in the desert he continues to help the Jews enter Israel by sending messengers to Edom.

Compare this to the haftarah, the prophetic portion read this week. Yiftah promises God that if he is victorious in war whatever he sees first upon his return will be offered to God. Alas, he returns victorious and sees his daughter.

Here the Midrash notes that Yiftah could have gone to Pinchas the High Priest to annul the vow. But Yiftah said, "Should I, the head of tribes of Israel stoop to go to that civilian?" Pinchas also did not go out of his way to go to Yiftah, proclaiming, "Should I, a High Priest, lower myself and go to that boor?" (Tanhuma)

Unlike Moses who was without ego, Yiftah and Pinchas were filled with it and it cost the life of that child.

A story is told of a Hassidic rabbi who carried two notes in his pocket. One stated, "the world was created for me." The second declared, "I am like the dust of the earth." The first statement does not resonate unless balanced by the latter. Indeed if ego is not kept tightly in check it can overwhelm or subtly subvert the endeavor to which one is dedicated.

Rabbi Avi Weiss is the Founder and President of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School and Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.