

LEADERSHIP OR INDEPENDENCE?

by Rabbi Berel Wein

This week's parsha tells of the tragic end game of the generation of the desert. The great leader of Israel, Moshe, is told that he will suffer the same fate of not living to enter the Land of Israel as does his generation. The premier generation of Jewish history - dor deah, a generation of great knowledge and intelligence - is doomed never to see the promised land of Israel.

The greatest of all of the prophets and leaders of the Jewish people will accompany his generation to the grave without realizing his life's ambition of coming to the Land of Israel. Yet in the midst of this personal disappointment and national tragedy the Torah emphasizes for us the eternity of the Jewish people.

Yehoshua will continue the work and preserve the legacy of Moshe for the ages - and a new generation will arise that will enter the Land of Israel and settle in it. Whatever the previous generation was unable to accomplish, the next generation, even though less in knowledge and wisdom, will nevertheless achieve.

This next generation will not be psychologically burdened by the years of slavery in Egypt, it will not have worshipped the Golden Calf, it would not remember the complaints about food and water and the constant rebellions and dissatisfactions of their parents and grandparents with Moshe and God.

It will be faced with the stark choice of going forward and conquering the Land of Israel or remaining forever in a trackless and lethal desert. A generation that faces stark choices, almost no choices, usually is able to do the strong and correct thing and not delude itself that it will somehow survive permanently in a desert.

The absence of Moshe will also, strangely enough, force such a hard choice to be made. As long as Moshe is alive, the Jewish people place all of their trust in him. Nothing to worry about, Moshe will save us from our enemies and even from God's justice. Living in the desert is not so bad as long as Moshe remains with us. The manna falls from heaven in his merit and he always delivers water to us - and even meat on demand - if we complain strongly enough.

Moshe's presence amongst the Jews turns unfortunately into a hindrance for their progress in maturation and self-reliant independence. Moshe's transgression in this week's parsha - hitting the rock to draw forth water instead of speaking to it - may appear to be minor in our eyes, unworthy of the severe punishment meted out to him for this act. But the overall picture, and the effect of Moshe on his people, points to the necessity for him to step down as leader.

There are interests that weigh heavily in favor of Moshe and his continuing leadership. But there is a far-seeing and general interest of the nation as a whole that somehow overcomes Moshe's own personal interest. This week's parsha relates the final judgment of Moshe as seen in this perspective, and allows us a greater insight into the Torah's lessons and policies.

Shabat shalom.

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