

## Hukkat Sermon 5778

Sometimes we get so caught up in what is going on at the moment that we forget the larger context within which we labor. That situation is summed up by the phrase ‘can’t see the forest for the trees,’ and it has a number of different applications in life. Who can forget Alec Guinness in ‘The Bridge on the River Kwai,’ where he played Lieutenant Colonel Nicholson, commanding officer of a British prisoner of war brigade held by the Japanese? In order to keep up morale, he orders his men to build the bridge of the film’s title, providing them a long-term goal to keep their minds occupied and their bodies fit until the end of the war. He fails to see until it is almost too late, that this bridge is not disconnected from the larger war effort, which is to say it is a great boon to the Japanese in transporting troops and material. He and his men get become so deeply involved in the details of how to build the bridge that they forget that the people for whom they are working are the enemy!

In today’s parsha we read the passage about Moses and Aaron getting water from the rock and God’s subsequent decree about their impending deaths, before ever reaching Canaan. The key to understanding the episode of Moses and the rock, the larger context within which it plays out, is that his and Aaron’s sister Miriam has just died. While the Torah does not say so explicitly, there are a number of traditions that ascribe the miraculous presence of water during the wilderness journey to Miriam. She is associated with water: She stationed herself by the Niles to watch what would happen to baby Moses; she leads the people in song at the Sea of Reeds. The midrash claims that wherever the people would stop to camp, a well would appear in deference to her. After Miriam’s death, the people become anxious. Without her, they may be feeling, there may be no water. So we can read the passage of God, Moses and the rock as God

reassuring Moses: ‘Yes, yes, you can still get water, even without Miriam. Just talk to the rock; water will come out.’ Instead, Mose flies off the handle. He insults the people, calling them ‘rebels.’ He phrases his response to them as ‘Shall we [Moses and Aaron, that is] get water for you’ rather than attributing that miracle to God. And instead of speaking to the rock, as God instructed, Moses strikes it. We get the impression that he would just as soon strike the people!

All of those actions, taken together, suggest that Moses has lost perspective. We can attribute that to a number of factors: His sister Miriam’s recent death; the constant rebellions by the people; his own advanced age. Whether one of these things is the cause or a combination, Moses does not react well in this episode. His own, usually submerged, feelings of grief, hurt and weariness combine to finally, and publicly, reveal a prophet who is all too human. What dooms Moses to die in the wilderness rather than reach the Promised Land is that he gets bogged down in the minutiae of getting water, at a time when he can least focus on those details emotionally, and forgets the larger purpose for which he has been laboring, ever since he first confronted Pharaoh and demanded freedom for his people. Moses’ exalted task is to lead the people from bondage to freedom, but he is stuck dealing with a public works project, while he is in shivah! As a result, he forgets the big picture in the heat of the moment; he can no longer see the forest for the trees.

How often do we get caught up in the emotion of the moment and let our anxiety, frustration or even anger over something small jeopardize our work or relationships? How many times have we insisted that some particular thing be a certain way, to the detriment of the larger vision of how things should be generally? I often see this dynamic play out within families. The small things at the heart of a particular disagreement can symbolize the underlying tensions

between people and act as triggers for new disagreements. For Moses, the people's incessant whining for better provisions finally coincides with his personal problems, resulting in an unusual testiness from him; that anger is then the basis for God punishing him. For us, family arguments over money, for instance, can be the latest expression of long-simmering anger, giving expression to the negativity that is already present, and lead to a deepening of the gap between relatives. The effects of long-unresolved issues themselves become cause for future ill will.

We see it in our national family as well, in the arena of policy and politics. I cannot let this week's events in the area of immigration policy go unremarked. While I take no public stand as rabbi on the details of immigration policy, the implementation of that policy has revealed many of the same traits as the family dynamics I mentioned: An unwillingness to understand other people's motivations in coming to this country, an insistence on the principle of zero tolerance for illegal migration, even in the face of obvious moral quandaries surrounding the separation of families; accusations of anti-Americanism against those who question either the policy or its implementation.

What we can learn from Moses' experience at the rock is a lesson about perspective. From the time of the Exodus itself, Moses was able to deal with the problems of getting this people out of Egypt, of battling Pharaoh, of providing for a nation unschooled in self-sufficiency. But now, turned away from the border of Canaan, running out the next generation's lives, Moses is no longer able to maintain the proper perspective between day to day problems and the larger covenant with God. He allows the small things – complaints, difficult conditions, personal grief over Miriam's death – to obscure the big picture. He is now like everyone else, responding to

pettiness in kind. He is no longer entitled to lead the people into the land, because he has lost the moral high ground that for so long enabled him to overlook daily problems. Now he is just a man, so of course he must die before reaching the Promised Land, just like everyone else in his generation.

If Moses was subject to loss of perspective, how much more so the rest of us. In our families and in our politics – really just two expressions of the same dynamic – we are prone to losing sight of the big picture. To the extent that we can remember what is really important to us, where we want to be headed as families and as a nation, we will be able to overcome small setbacks and the problems that always arise from day to day. We can feel anxious or frustrated or even angry, as long as we do not allow those feelings to persist longer than they are warranted, or to degenerate into relationship-threatening or mission-threatening behavior. Everyone gets upset sometimes, but we need to be able to avoid, or to get over, momentary anger in order to protect the larger covenants that we share as families and as a nation. In our families and in politics it is OK to say ‘You win.’ It is mature and civil to say ‘I don’t like this, but I will learn to live with it.’ It is noble to say ‘I opposed this before, but embrace it now as our new reality.’ We must all learn to stop striking the rock of our own frustration to allow the water of reconciliation to flow freely.

Shabbat shalom