

A License to Lead

Category: Bamidbar, Korach

When someone is thrown out of a profession after a lifetime of service, the change is very jarring. Is that what happened to Moshe Rabbeinu?

What's New

“Mah nishtanah” is asked not just on Passover eve—it’s become a Jewish expression, a part of the slang. In Israel and beyond, when a Jew experiences something strange, he asks, “Mah nishtanah?”

This week, as I studied the parshah, I asked myself the same question: “Mah nishtanah?”

Our Torah portion tells us about Korach, a cousin of Moshe Rabbeinu himself, a rich and important man. One day, Korach joined with Dasan and Aviram, two shady creatures who constantly created problems for Moshe, and with 250 community leaders. Together they all approached Moshe with a very strange challenge: “Why have you made yourselves elite over G-d’s assembly?”

In plain English: Who are you? Who appointed you? How is it that you’re the leader and king around here and your brother Aharon is the High Priest? As the verse states, “For the entire congregation are all holy!” Why you two?

When you read this, you ask yourself, “Mah nishtanah?” What happened on that day that motivated Korach to challenge Moshe’s leadership?

Moshe had been the Jewish Nation’s leader since their departure from Egypt, which was a year and a half before the story of Korach. Furthermore, Moshe had arrived in Egypt at least six months before the Exodus, proving his leadership time after time: the Ten Plagues, the Exodus, the Splitting of the Sea. Then, most important of all, came the Giving of the Torah, at which everyone witnessed G-d Himself speaking to Moshe. So what happened that caused Korach to suddenly challenge Moshe with “Why have you made yourselves elite?” What new development happened here?

It's the same question with Aharon. Aharon had been the High Priest at least since the Mishkan had been erected at the beginning of the month of Nisan—which means that he had been Kohen Gadol for about six months. So why it is that towards the end of the summer Korach suddenly wakes up one day and starts hollering, "Who do you guys think you are?"

Maybe the desert heat got to him.

The Lost Mission

I remember that many years ago, political commentators observed that the September 11 attacks saved the presidency of George W. Bush. Until then, he was a president with no agenda. He had no goal. He was elected president but he didn't have a specific plan of what he was going to accomplish. Yes, he would be president and he would try to do good things, but there was nothing more to it.

Suddenly 9/11 happened—giving him a goal. Overnight, George W. Bush transformed into the great anti-terror crusader, battling the "Axis of Evil" as he himself put it. Ever since that day, he had a specific mission and goal: To save the world from terrorism.

Perhaps it can be said that as much as George W. Bush saved the world from terror, terror saved the career of George W. Bush.

Not to compare Moshe to Bush, but the same essential story happened to Moshe—just in precisely the opposite order.

Moshe had three specific missions that comprised his leadership: Taking the Jews from Egypt, which he accomplished spectacularly; the Giving of the Torah, at which he brought the Jews to Mt. Sinai where G-d revealed Himself to everyone and issued the Ten Commandments and Moshe brought down the Two Tablets; and, most important of all, bringing the Jews into the Land of Israel, into the promised "land flowing with milk and honey."

And then everything fell apart.

First, the Spies returned from spying the land. That day was Tisha B'Av. They claimed that it was impossible to conquer the Land. Everyone complained. So G-d decreed that the Jews would remain in the desert for 40 years, with only the next

generation entering the Land under the leadership of Yehoshua. They learned that Moshe would die first.

Thus, Moshe no longer had a mission as a leader. That was it. His career was over. His primary target was the introduction of the Jewish People into the Holy Land—and now it seemed like it wasn't going to happen. That's why Korach came along and asked, "Why have you made yourselves elite?" As Dasan and Aviram said explicitly to Moshe: "Not even to a land flowing with milk and honey have you brought us!" In other words, you're not the one who'll be bringing us into the Holy Land.

Indeed, we see that after the saga of the Spies, nothing new happened in the desert.

From that point until the end of the 40th year in the desert, there was no news. As Rashi comments at the beginning of the Book of Devarim: "From the sending of the Spies until now the phrase '[G-d] spoke' does not appear, but rather, the phrase '[G-d] said,' which teaches us that for the 38 years in which the Jews were rebuked, the Divine Voice did not connect to Moshe in loving terms, face to face..."

Rashi's explanation comes from the Talmud (Tractates Taanis 30b and Bava Kama 121b), which tells us that after the sin of the Spies, G-d did not speak to Moshe "face to face" since the Jewish People were "nezofim," meaning rebuked or unwanted before G-d. That's why Moshe didn't get the same "access" to G-d.

Only at the end of the 40-year period, five months before his passing, did G-d resume speaking with Moshe "face to face."

This does not mean that Moshe had no connection to G-d for 38 years, G-d forbid. Rather, it means that it was no longer the same. G-d now spoke to Moshe the way He did with all other Prophets: With a "vision in the night," or through an angel, or through the Urim V'Tumim, a mystical document inside the chest plate worn by the High Priest—but not the same open dialogue that Moshe had at the beginning.

So again, we see that from the decree that Moshe would not enter the land and onwards, it just wasn't the same. Obviously, he was the leader and he remained Moshe Rabbeinu, but it wasn't it.

Keep the Job

It's like a big surgeon whose medical license is revoked. How would that surgeon feel? Yes, he can still serve as an advisor, he can open some other business, he can do 1,000 other things—but he's not the same man he was. His life is now divided into two parts: Before and after. Without his license, he has lost his primary mission in life.

Well over 80 years ago, the Previous Lubavitcher Rabbi, Rabbi Joseph I. Schneersohn (1880-1950), was jailed in Russian Communist prison for the “crime” of spreading Torah. Once he was miraculously released, the Previous Rebbe told one of his closest Chassidim that while he sat in prison, his pain at being unable to write letters of advice or inspiration to his fellow Jews was so agonizing that he wished that his writing hand would physically wither.

The Rebbe (our Rebbe, the Previous Rebbe's son-in-law) asked: But he could have put on tefillin with that same hand, or done many other good things? So why did he think it would be better for his hand to wither away? The Rebbe answered that his father-in-law so strongly felt that his mission in life was to help fellow Jews that at the moment he was no longer able to do so, his hand had no further use—compared to his primary mission of spreading Judaism, everything else, as good as they may have been, had no place whatsoever.

In order not to lose his medical license, a surgeon must perform a specific minimum of surgeries per year. In order not to lose his legal license, a lawyer must participate in a minimum number of classes known as continuing legal education, or CLEs. (Doctors' classes, of course, are called CMEs.)

And for us not to lose our “licenses” as parents of Jewish children, we need to serve as role models to them of how Jews are to live.

It is thus incumbent upon us to further our self-improvement by going to Torah classes. Just like a surgeon needs to perform a minimum number of operations each year, and an anesthesiologist needs to knock out a minimum number of patients each year, to maintain their licenses, we too must physically do mitzvos.

But not just to not lose our “licenses”—to become better and better Jews.