

Continuity in the Rabbinate

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Poor Moses. Forty years after he led the unwilling people out of Egypt, he is still in the Wilderness and he has been told that this is where he will stay. Any youthful idealism and energy he may once have had has been replaced by a deep, gnawing anxiety that the whole journey might have been for nothing, that the whole project to create a free people in their own land might still go horribly wrong – if they should forget the lessons they have learned in this time.

And the signs are not good. The history of the Exodus has essentially been one of repeated Failure until now. The Israelites have consistently failed to show gratitude; they have had difficulties in accepting the concept of an abstract God without any image, they had problems accepting the new structure involving a hereditary Priesthood and a single authorised Sanctuary through which God could be approached. The spies sent to check out the land God had promised came back with a negative report, ten of the twelve unwilling to see that God was behind them. The remaining two could not convince the fainthearts. In the meantime God has publicly punished Korach and his followers, and those who demanded meat on the menu, and various hostile tribes who stood in their way, and provided a daily diet of Manna. And STILL there is no guarantee that the current Israelites – who are, let us not forget, now the children and grandchildren of those who experienced most of these wonders directly – will retain their discipline, their morale, their sense of purpose. Indeed, we have only reached this sidra at all because Moses was able to persuade God to give the Israelites another chance, to wait and let an entire generation die, so that the following one could eventually move forward. All the initial emigrés – bar two – will leave their bodies in the desert. This has included Moses' brother and his sister and now it will include him too.

The Torah does not have a 'Happy Ending' as such. Once Moses has finished his series of increasingly-stressed and rambling memoirs in a last-ditch effort to persuade the Israelites not to forget all that they have collectively experienced and learned, he will die – alone. He has spent forty years in a wilderness, working with an ungrateful and rebellious flock, for a boss whom he has only experienced directly once and even that only fleetingly; his marriage has broken down, he has lost contact to his own sons, he has been criticised for taking a second partner, he never gets a decent pension, and he dies alone. So he becomes known as "Moshe Rabbenu" – 'Moses our Rabbi' - clearly his career forms a role model that is still relevant for many modern rabbis!

And yet - and yet the story WILL go on – without him. Joshua will lead the people forward, they will develop new leadership structures, judges, kings, they will throw up their own self-critical internal auditors, the prophets. They will learn to settle in a land and they will even learn to live without it again, in exile, and to come back to it, and to leave, and to come back again.... They will write new books, develop new rituals, prepare new liturgies, learn to live in different climates and as minorities amongst different cultures. The rabbis were aware of the significance of this process and this continuity combined with change. In the Talmud, Menachot 29b, Moses is sent by God to sit in the 8th. row of Rabbi Akiva's class and is totally confused until he is told that what Akiva is teaching is directly derived from Moses's own teachings!

Having recently reached the age of 60 – only half way to Moses' 120! - I can already begin to see that people I have taught during my rabbinic career so far, maybe for Bar-Mitzvah, maybe at youth programmes, maybe as adult education participants, maybe for conversion – are beginning

to take up leadership positions in communities and organisations such as 'Limmud'. Often they develop new perspectives, new priorities. The Judaism I learned and the Judaism I was able to teach them will gradually evolve into a Judaism that suits their needs and presumably this process will continue. Jews of the Face-Book rather than the Faith-Book age, Jews who live in a time of social networking rather than organised communities, Jews with immediate and autonomous access to the entire corpus of rabbinic literature at the swipe of a smartphone, will of course need different techniques and acquire different insights than those who grew up with paper and printed books and the need to read and memorise. They are no longer the survivors of a major catastrophe, they are often not even the children of the Holocaust survivors but the grandchildren of those who lived and suffered through that time. But it will be Judaism, still. IF they retain these roots that go back to Moses, if they listen to his voice as well as God's.

Moses worries – and legitimately so. What will happen when he is no longer there to direct events, to warn and to cajole and to remind his people? It is the fear of all parents as their children grow and become independent. But one has to let go. Moses actually makes quite a good job of it in the end – much better than do many political leaders. He appoints judges and gives them advice and authority; he submits (eventually) to the news of his own mortality, he appoints and encourages – as he has been told to do – his own successor. He writes down what he can remember, what he thinks important. He ends with a blessing and a song.

"Eyleh HaDevarim asher dibber Moshe..." "These are the words which Moses spoke to the people of Israel, when they were still on the far side of the Jordan...." They are good words, well worth reading.

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Rabbi Dr. Walter Rothschild

Berlin, Germany.

Landesrabbiner of Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, and 'Or Chadasch', Vienna, Austria.