

Devarim 5781

Moses Remembers

One way or another, a number of our folks have connections with our local Jewish Family Services. And sometimes the JFS social work/counseling team invite their local rabbis to run a session with them. It was my turn this past week.

Together we did a case study on Moses. We imagined him coming to counseling after he'd hit the rock¹ and we explored what made him do it. As well as identifying that he was in grief and that he had something of a long-term anger problem - and, a new idea to me, that he was hungry and thirsty like the rest of the tribe - a number of the team pointed out that he seems to feel all alone in his leadership. *Listen, you rebels, he cries, shall we get water for you from this rock?* and then proceeds to ignore Aaron - and the Holy One - completely.

But this week we see a slightly different Moses. The book of Devarim begins with him looking back on "the story so far" - but not in chronological order. It is interesting to see how he arranges his material.

Diplomat Sophie Ross points out that he begins the story not with what we might think of as the big highlights - the Exodus itself, the revelation at Sinai - but with the fact that the people have become so numerous that he can't lead them alone. His first memory is that he nominated tribal leaders to act as magistrates, not favoring the rich or the poor and judging each case on its merits.

The first thing Moses recounts is not an incident, but a system. Not an event that happened to him personally, but something fundamental to the collective. There are actually two ideas in play: shared leadership and impartial justice. Shared leadership allows growth, development and the chance for individuals to play to their strengths; impartial justice creates a bedrock of trust. In his retelling of the people's journey, when Moses already knows his days are numbered, he prioritizes not an incident, but a model for society.

¹ see *Bamidbar* 20:1-12

It's just as revealing to look at the last piece of the story that Moses recounts. The main part of his recollections end with his retelling the incident of the Golden Calf² (but minus his own encounter with the Holy One). After that he will switch gear and talk about the rules - the commandments, old and new, that are to bind the people - and then the sanctions that could happen if the people disobey. And it's this material that will occupy most of the rest of the book.

But over halfway through the book, at the end of parashat *ki tetze*, a final memory punches its way through:

*Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey...*³

Moses recounts how Amalek set upon the people when they were faint and weary, and struck down the stragglers who were keeping up the rear. This memory forms the basis of the customs we still observe today to "blot out" the memory of Amalek (we drown out the mention of Haman, his descendant, and Torah scribes practice their art by writing and then erasing the word Amalek).

Why does Moses remember this particular incident, long after he's done with narrating the journey?

Out of all the possible reasons, let's consider two.

First - Amalek's specific evil is that he preys on the vulnerable. He destroys people one by one - the sick, the needy, the young, the slow. He sneaks up in back rather than attacking from the front. He ignores the rules of war - the system - and goes his own way instead. He's unfair. He's a bully. He exemplifies a kind of anarchy.

² see *Devarim* 10:1-11

³ *Devarim* 25:17ff.

So Moses' last memory is the exact inverse of his first. A single individual acting capriciously rather than a team with a shared vision. A tilting at the vulnerable rather than the creation of a level playing field. Random cruelty rather than carefully administered justice. Moses' last memory inversely underscores the message of his first - that without a system there can be no society.

And second - when Moses remembers the battle with Amalek he might also be remembering his own part in it.⁴ He sent out Joshua - the same Joshua who would inherit his leadership - to fight Amalek's army. He himself went up to the top of a hill with Aaron and Hur to look at the battle, and - miraculously - whenever he held up his arm, the Israelites would be stronger, but whenever he let it fall, the Amalekites would push back. So Aaron and Hur sat Moses down on a rock and each lifted up one of his arms until the battle was won. It's a powerful image of shared leadership - which of course brings us back to his first memory, his first priority for the people as the book of Devarim begins - that human power works better when it's shared.

So did Moses learn something from hitting the rock, in the end? As he sat at the top of Mt Nebo at the end of his life, looking out over the land of Israel, did it stir up memories of looking out over the battlefield when he was so much younger? And did he realize how far he had come from the man who hit the rock?

Perhaps he did.

Shabbat shalom.

⁴ *Shemot* 17:8-13