

Chukat 2015

Delivered by Rabbi 6/27/15

This week's Parsha features one of the most perplexing incidents in the entire Torah. The Jews have been wandering for 40 years in the desert and they're thirsty. So Gd tells Moses to speak to the rock and water will come forth (Numbers 20:8). This week's instruction to "speak" to the rock is in contrast to 40 years earlier, when Moses followed God's instruction to hit the rock - and water gushed out (Exodus 17:6). This time, Moses is to speak. Yet he again hits the rock. Nothing happens, so Moses hits the rock a second time, and water comes out. God's response: "Since you HIT the rock rather than speaking to it, you will not lead the Jewish people into the Land of Israel" (Numbers 20:11-12).

We read this story and think: Here's the mighty Moses who confronted Pharaoh, arranged the Ten Plagues, split the Red Sea, brought the Torah down from Mount Sinai, and defended the people through trials and tribulations in the desert. Now he makes one little mistake and Gd takes away his dream of entering Israel. The consequence seems inappropriately harsh! And there are a great number of explanations for why Moshe is punished. Obviously there is the fact that he hit instead of spoke to the rock. There are also those who think that Moshe and Aaron make it sound like THEY are the ones working the miracle and not Gd. But really, the explanation that makes the most sense to me is that of Rambam who says, in essence: Moshe lost the right to lead the People because he lost his temper. He called the Children of Israel, "Morim" - "Rebels," and then strikes the rock in exasperation.

So now we get the picture: Moshe loses his cool and so he cannot lead. That makes sense. A leader needs to be patient and empathetic. But I want to paint this picture with a finer brush. I think that one of the reasons Moshe is taken out of leadership responsibilities is that he can no longer see the People he is leading as individuals. He lumps all of the together. Were some of them rebels at that moment? I am sure they were. Were others really trouble makers? Sure. Were some even evil? Likley - there are always bound to be a few rotten apples. But were ALL of them rebellious? Were all, 100% of them acting out? You know that can't be the case! How could Moses see into the hearts of millions of people all at once? And the answer is he couldn't, but the people who heard him thought *that he thought* he could. He was guilty, in a sense of stereo-typing, of thinking he knew all people because he could find evidence of the problems he was looking for in the few. And that kind of gross over-simplification; that innate desire to type-cast people, to have a certain set of assumptions about a particular group of people is what leads to prejudice and injustice. (Donald Trump, anyone?)

This Shabbat, in the wake of Charleston, in a show of unity, Jewish organizations around the country are joining, as we are, in a Solidarity Shabbat with African Americans, fellow citizens of the United States. Synagogues across the country are taking some time to look at the roots of racial injustice and the kind of hatred that sometimes leads to the most vile forms of violence, as we saw in Charleston.

It is clear to all of us that stereo-typing and painting all African Americans with broad strokes as being one type of person or another is just plain wrong. You don't need me to tell you not to judge a person by the color of their skin. And if you do: Don't judge a person by the color of his or her skin! We, of all people, know how hurtful and harmful that is. We have been on the

receiving end far too often to be oblivious to this tendency, even in ourselves. But on this Unity Shabbat, I want to offer another, positive way that we might be able to approach this challenge.

Earlier in the week, there was a big discussion, debate and controversy of a woman who works for the NAACP "passing" for black when she was really white. And many who spoke out against a woman who had devoted a good part of her life to fighting bigotry and hatred took her to task by saying, "How could a white person possibly understand what it is like to be back in America? Until you have actually stood where we stand, don't presume to know how we feel." And I can't exactly address this from the standpoint of how African Americans feel about themselves, but I can analogize it to something closer to home. Some of us, some Jewish people can and do say, "No one but Jews can understand what the Holocaust meant to the Jewish People. You have to have OUR historical perspective to put it in its proper context." And maybe that is true - for some people. Maybe it is true that many people could not have the degree of empathy needed to understand how we feel. But to say that NO ONE CAN POSSIBLY KNOW HOW WE FEEL, NO ONE CAN HAVE THAT DEGREE OF EMPATHY IN HIS OR HER HEART AND SOUL IS JUST PLAIN WRONG. It's the sin of Moses calling EVERYONE rebels.

I think that part of the process of addressing racial bias and hatred; part of the process in addressing anti-Semitism, is reasserting the idea that people who are not US can nonetheless feel what we are feeling. It might not be exactly the same feeling, but it can likely get pretty close. The more we assume that others cannot feel what we are feeling the less likely we are to try to feel what THEY are feeling. Unity means that there are feelings and sensitivities, sensitivities to all that is good and all that is evil in the world, that we all share. Are some people oblivious to them? Sure. Are some people determined to hate. Of course. But the majority of us are simply content to live our own insular lives, thinking that others might not feel what we are feeling. We need to persuade ourselves otherwise. I know what some folks might say: ...But being Jewish is different... But being black is different.. But being Gay is different... You fill in the label. That's the easy part. But being open enough with ourselves and our own emotions to believe in our hearts that people who are genuinely different LOOKING than us, are actually feeling a lot of what we are feeling on the inside is a simple truth with profound implications. I think enough Americans could feel what gay people were feeling, even if they themselves are not gay, that the Supreme Court was moved to make the landmark decision we saw this week. It is indeed possible to feel what others are feeling, and also to assume that they can feel what we feel on the inside too. Is it exact? Is it a perfect empathy? No, of course not. We are all individuals. But there is indeed a common core of humanity that unites the vast majority of people in this country. We are not the same, and yet we are closer to one another than we often think. I think we need to give people the "empathy benefit of the doubt," to believe deep down that they feel what we are feeling, and that if we try, we too can feel what's going on inside of them.

And yes, such idealism may seem futile or at best naïve. In fact, some may say it's like talking to a rock. But there is a reason Moshe is told to talk to the rock. It's because talking is the first step in healing. And the very first step is talking to ourselves and listening to what we say in our own hearts and then realizing that other good people like us are doing exactly the same thing.