

Trusting/Distrusting Our Leaders Passover  
Sunday, April 10, 2022  
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists  
Summerfield, FL  
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Passover, the Jewish holiday celebrating the escape of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, begins this Friday at sunset and lasts until nightfall on Saturday the 23rd. I expect when your mind recalls the story the person you think of first is Moses, leader of the people, but the first person to distrust Moses as a leader was Moses himself.

Most of us when we come into a leadership role either volunteer to do the job or get asked by another person. According to the Bible story Moses gets tapped by God Godself speaking from a burning bush. According to the third chapter of Exodus God says to Moses, "So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt," Exodus 3:10 NIV. And what is Moses' response? "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Exodus 3:11bNIV. Moses continues to ask questions and offer excuses. When the people ask who gave me the authority to do this what name shall I give them? What if they don't believe me or listen to me? I don't speak well. And finally, please send someone else. According to the scripture God does not let Moses off the hook, but does tell Moses to take his brother Aaron, who does speak well, with him. Together they can do this.

That is not a bad example for all of us. Sometimes when we would like to or are asked to take on a role that we do not trust ourselves to hold or do something that we fear we cannot do our first step might be to find someone who will do it with us. As the African proverb says, "If you want to go fast go alone, but if you want to go far go together."

So, Moses had his brother Aaron with him to lead the people out of Egypt and slavery, but when the people had fled and had crossed over the Red Sea and felt like they had made it safely away from the Egyptian soldiers it was time to celebrate. Sure, they weren't to the Promised Land yet, but certainly being free from those chasing you to kill you or bring you back to slavery was something to celebrate of itself. Again, another lesson for all of us. We don't have to wait till we get to our ultimate goal to celebrate. It is completely appropriate to celebrate the various steps along the way.

Sometimes the leaders of the work though are not the best leaders of celebrations. Listen who Exodus tells us is a key leader of the Israelite's celebration. "When Pharaoh's horses, chariots and horsemen went into the sea, the Lord brought the waters of the sea back over them, but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground. Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. Miriam sang to them:  
'Sing to the Lord,

for he is highly exalted.  
Both horse and driver

he has hurled into the sea,'" Exodus 15:19-21NIV. This is becoming a family affair, but Moses and Aaron and Miriam are trusting in each other's strengths. No one of them has to do it all alone.

Until one of them begins to think he does need to do it alone. The book of Exodus says that "Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, together with Moses' sons and wife, came to him in the wilderness, where he was camped near the mountain of God.... Moses told his father-in-law about everything the Lord had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians for Israel's sake and about all the hardships they had met along the way and how the Lord had saved them.... The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. When his father-in-law saw

all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, “What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?... “What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. ... select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you... Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said....,” Exodus 18: 1-24 NIV. Sometimes other people can see things more clearly than we can ourselves. As leaders it is good to be able to hear critiques and advice and, when appropriate, to act on it.

Jethro had the best of intentions in offering his critique to his son-in-law Moses. He wanted Moses’ well-being and the best for the people of Israel. And he had a solution to offer. As leaders it can be much easier to hear critique and take advice from someone with those kinds of good intentions. But that was not the only kind of critique Moses received.

Exodus tells us that, “In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death,’” Exodus 16:2,3NIV. That sounds like a heavy criticism. You got us out of slavery just so we can starve to death. You might say that the quails that came in the evening and the manna that was found on the grass in the morning were miracles from God, but what if they had always been there and the people just couldn’t see what they already had? That can be true for us as leaders and as a community as well. What resources do we have that we are blind to? What needs to happen so that we can see the quail and manna we are currently ignoring?

So now the people of Israel are fed, but they have other complaints. In the very next chapter of Exodus we hear, “The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. 2 So they quarreled with Moses and said, ‘Give us water to drink,’...the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, ‘Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?’ Then Moses cried out to the Lord, ‘What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me,’” Exodus 17:1-4.

We are told that God provided the people with water, but this was going to be a repeated complaint. The Book of Numbers says this of an event late in the people’s 40 years of wandering, “Now there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. They quarreled with Moses and said, ‘If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the Lord! Why did you bring the Lord’s community into this wilderness, that we and our livestock should die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!’” Numbers 20:2-5NIV. This time Moses lost it. He was supposed to speak to a rock that would provide water but instead he hit it.

Rabbi Susan Leider says, “God says to Moses: You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Moses takes the rod from God, and assembles the congregation in front of the rock; he says to them, “Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?” And Moses raises his hand, striking the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank.

“But God said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm my sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead the congregation into the land that I have given them’ ([Numbers 20:7-13](#)).

Rabbi Leider continues, "Moses, our great leader, will not see the very thing that he spent his life's work on. Why was he punished? Was it really that bad that Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it? Was it a lack of faith? Was it excessive anger?"

"The Torah doesn't say that Moses lost his temper, but the great medieval sage Maimonides says that Moses departed from 'the moral mean of patience.' In other words, his anger was over the top. It was unthinkable that a man such as Moses show this kind of anger in the presence of the entire community. You can almost hear Maimonides saying, 'What a shanda. What a shame that we should see a leader behave like this,'" [When Moses boils over, we take stock of our own anger – J. \(jweekly.com\)](#).

Do you know the number one reason I hear from people who do not attend a congregation as to why they do not? The hypocrisy of the people who do attend. Congregant or faith leader at any type of congregation including Unitarian Universalist the most effective advertisement we have for our communities is ourselves. How we act will determine whether that advertising draws people in or repels them.

After 40 years of work Moses and Aaron are not going to enter the Promised Land. You don't have to believe that that was divine punishment to understand the sadness of it, but many of us work at things we will not see come to fruition. The women who began the women's suffrage movement in this country were dead before the vote was gained for women. If you are working for more and better responses to climate change today you may not live to see what you accomplish. According to Deuteronomy Moses begged to at least go up a mountain and look at the land. We are told that God said to Moses, "'Go up to the top of Pisgah and look west and north and south and east. Look at the land with your own eyes, since you are not going to cross this Jordan. But commission Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, for he will lead this people across and will cause them to inherit the land that you will see,'" Deuteronomy 3:27-28NIV. At the end Moses had to trust someone else to finish his work. He could tap Joshua as his successor. He could do what he could to give him the tools he needed for the task, but, in the end, Moses had to let go and let Joshua be the new lead. Again, it is a lesson for all of us. None of us is going to be capable of doing what we do forever. Most of us are probably not going to equal Moses' forty years of service. We need to be tapping successors and training them, encouraging them and strengthening them.

You know the quote. "'We've got some difficult days ahead,' Martin Luther King, Jr., told an overflowing crowd in Memphis, Tennessee, on 3 April 1968, where the city's sanitation workers were striking. 'But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop ... I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land,'" ["I've Been to the Mountaintop" | The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute \(stanford.edu\)](#). Sometimes the last thing a leader needs to do is give such words of encouragement to those coming after them. Once you have been trusted and others have followed your vision, encouragement may be the last gift you can give.

To be a leader is to be trusted and mistrusted by those you lead and sometimes by yourself, but if you have enough faith in where you are leading it is all worth it even if you do not get there yourself. Moses, Rev. Dr. King, most of us, only get to see the Promised Land from the mountaintop. But deep in my heart I do believe we will get there someday. Next year in Jerusalem.