

Vaera

Ups and Downs, Leadership, and Gentleness

Jewish history is filled with ups and downs. There is no such thing as continuous ascent or continuous descent in Jewish history. We have always been beset by great problems both internally and externally and by great feelings of promise. In some periods of Jewish history we have been filled more with hope and expectation. At other times we have been discouraged and filled more with hopelessness. Life is a wheel which constantly turns; sometimes we are up and sometimes we are down. These swings in fortune are many times very hard to deal with. People who have been idolized and told by all their friends and the media that they are heroes are not branded as collaborators and hinderers of progress, the enemies of humanity. Sometimes it is easy to pursue a course of action because everybody is acclaiming you. At other times it is very difficult because everybody is denigrating you.

In the *Torah* portion *Vaera* we learn about these ups and downs. Moshe had been sent by G-d to redeem the Jewish people but his task had not been made easy. Since he came and spoke to Pharaoh, things had gotten harder, not better for the Jewish people. Not only was straw now denied to the Jewish people and the same quota of bricks demanded of them, but they were now also forbidden to assemble and gain comfort one from another. That's how the rabbis explain the expression, "You shall not continue to give straw to the people." The word is spelled with an extra "*Aleph*" so the word can mean both "you cannot continue" and "you cannot assemble." The Jewish people's lot had gotten worse. The Jews now had to gather their own straw but the number of bricks was to remain the same, and they could not assemble together.

The leaders of the people protested to Moshe and Aaron. They said, "Let G-d look upon you and judge that you have made our odor stink in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servant to give a sword in his hand to kill us," and Moshe turned to G-d and said, "G-d, why did You do evil to this people? Why did You send me? Since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done bad to this people and You have not saved Your people." G-d answered Moshe and said, "Now, you will see what I will do to Pharaoh because with a strong hand he will send them out and

with a strong hand he will chase them from out of this land.” Moshe was terribly discouraged. He was not very discouraged because of what Pharaoh had done, but he was terribly discouraged by the reaction of the Jewish people. Their own leadership was turning against him. They had enough of dreams of Jewish independence. They wanted to be left alone. They had endured much and they did not want to have more burdens placed upon them. Moshe could understand Pharaoh’s response, but it was very hard for him to understand especially the leaders of the Jewish people’s response. He was, after all, a very compassionate man. He understood how they had suffered and he did not want them to have to suffer more. He understood how they were tired of their burdens, but he could not understand their illusions. Did they really think that their slavery was going to get better? Did they really think that they were going to be able to achieve freedom without greater sacrifice? Moshe could not understand the people.

In the *Torah* portion *Vaera* G-d answers Moshe by telling him to say to the people of Israel, “I am Hashem and I will bring you out from under the burdens of Egypt, and I will save you from their service, and I will redeem you with an outstretched hand and with great wonders, and I will take you to Me to be a nation, and I will be to you as a G-d and you will know that I am your G-d who brought you out from under the burdens of Egypt, and I will bring you to the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you as a heritage. I am Hashem.”

The rabbis explain that there are four expressions for deliverance here. G-d first had to save them from physical danger, from the terrible burdens. He was then going to have to save them from the Egyptian idol worship. The Jews had been so cowed by the Egyptian bondage that they, themselves, began to believe in the idols of the Egyptians and their values and their way of life. Then G-d said, “I will redeem you with an outstretched hand.” You, yourself, will be very impressed by the fact that G-d wants you, the Jewish people, to be separate and distinct and unique, and finally G-d said, “I will take you to Me for a nation.” Jewish spirituality will grow and flourish. You will lead a life dedicated to spiritual values. Then it says, “I will bring you to the land and give it to you as a heritage.” The Jewish people were promised relief from physical persecution and from slavish attachment to false beliefs. They were promised splendid events which

would cause them great pride, and they were promised a rich inner life which would cause them to feel close to G-d and man, and finally they were promised the land of Israel but only as a heritage, not as an inheritance. The difference between a heritage and an inheritance is that an inheritance comes to you without effort, but a heritage comes to you only through hard work. They will have the potential to acquire it but they will have to acquire it themselves. Astonishingly, after Moshe told the people what G-d had promised them, they did not listen to Moshe. They did not listen to him the *Torah* says "because of an impatience of spirit and because of their hard false beliefs."

In our day, too, to have seen the same phenomenon repeated. We Jews, even after we have seen the great deliverance of the State of Israel reborn, have remained impatient with our Judaism. Even after we have seen the false ideas of communism and other isms, which have enslaved the minds of our people, broken we still have remained impatient with our Judaism. Even after we have seen such great events as the Six Day War which have made Jews proud, we have still remained impatient with Judaism, and even after we have seen how the spiritual riches of Judaism have been made available through translation to millions of people, yet, we Jewish people have still remained impatient. We want everything now. We have to realize that false beliefs and illusions cannot bring the fulfillment of our desires now. Many Jews are tired of the Jewish dream. It entails great sacrifice. Others are trapped by the false beliefs of modernity. They think that we can be like all other peoples not realizing that even in our own nation we can assimilate. Others are influenced by the belief that we can have everything now without realizing that the land of Israel and the traditions of Israel can only be acquired by hard work. There are going to be many ups and downs. There are going to be many disappointments, but we have to trudge on. After all, the Jewish people lived in the land of Israel for over 400 years before David finally captured Jerusalem and a permanent Temple was only constructed later by his son Solomon. We need patience and we also have to be careful that we are not overcome by illusions, illusions of power or illusions of the world's good will. Israel is not a superpower, and Jews throughout the world do not have much power. We have to continue to work for our goals patiently and doggedly realiz-

ing that there will always be ups and downs.

When G-d spoke to Moshe after he expressed his great discouragement, G-d said, "I am speaking to you by My name Hashem," which means that G-d assured Moshe that in spite of all the setbacks, all the promises that He, G-d, made will eventually be fulfilled. Moshe should not despair and the people should not despair. After the people rejected not only Moshe's words but G-d's words, Moshe became even more discouraged and he said before G-d, "Behold, the children of Israel do not listen to me. How will Pharaoh listen to me?" G-d spoke to him and to Aaron and "He commanded them to the sons of Israel and to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt." The rabbis ask, what does it mean "He commanded them?" They answer by saying that Moshe was told to treat the people gently, to understand their problems and not try to force things down their throat, not to be disappointed if they do not understand the message in the beginning. The Jewish people can only accomplish its goals if its top leadership realizes that it must understand the people, speak with them and communicate with them and treat them gently. They cannot try to browbeat them or silence them or even beat them. This will achieve nothing. If Moshe Rabbeinu, who knew that he bore G-d's message, was told by G-d to be gentle with the people, to explain to the people, to continually communicate with the people, how much more so should the leaders of our people today treat the people gently and realize that they must continually communicate with the people and present their views in a respectful and appropriate way never trying to browbeat the people or silence the people or beat them into submission. Sometimes the Jewish people find it difficult to accept new ideas, often for good reason because not all new ideas are correct, but even if the new ideas are correct, we must remember what G-d told Moshe: treat the people kindly and do not try to force ideas down their throats. Instead, communicate with them, respect them, and value each of them. Do not treat the people with disdain. The people have suffered a lot.

Especially in our own day after the Holocaust we Jews have suffered a lot. We need leadership who will communicate with us not browbeat us. Many times the people become discouraged and many times the leaders become discourages, but those who occupy the top positions can-

not bypass the people's natural leadership and cannot bypass the people. The only way for the people and the leaders to stop being discouraged is for them to communicate. If they will communicate then eventually all G-d's promises will be fulfilled, and the Jewish people and Judaism will flourish.