



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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“The Many Songs of Leadership”

Everyone has his or her own voice. Some express it loudly and clearly; some just mumble or whisper. There are those who let their voices be heard only in their professional lives and are silent and withdrawn at home. Others use their voices only within their families and stifle their voices in the outside world.

Our voices can be expressed in a variety of ways: through speech, through the written word, and even by means of our postures and gestures. Our voices can also be expressed through song.

In a book he wrote for managers of organizations coping with the complex challenges of the 21st century work environment, Stephen Covey makes the following statement: “There is a deep, innate, almost inexpressible

yearning within each one of us to find our voice in life.” That statement is the basis for his book, *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*, which is designed to help organizational leaders find their voices and inspire others to find theirs.

Each of the great leaders of the Jewish people, from biblical times down to the present, had his or her own distinctive voice. The voice of Abraham was heard throughout his world; the voice of Isaac was almost silent in comparison. Moses described his own voice as defective, yet he was capable of supreme eloquence. Joshua’s voice is never described as wanting in any way, yet we have few examples of his personal unique voice.

Some of our great leaders, including Moses, expressed their voices in song. We have the Song of the Sea in which the voice of Moses dominates; his sister Miriam responds to Moses’ song in her own voice; the Prophetess Deborah and King David are exemplary in their ability to use the medium of song to express their unique and distinctive voices.

All of the above are examples of how individual Jewish heroes and heroines found and expressed their voices. This week’s Torah portion, *Parshat Chukat*, provides an example of an entirely different kind of a voice: not the voice of one person, but the voice of an entire group, indeed of an entire nation. It is the Song of the Well, of the *Be’er*:

“...the well where the Lord said to Moses, ‘Assemble the people that I may give them water.’ Then Israel sang this song:

Spring up, O well – sing to it –

In Memory of our Daughter
On her 7th Yahrzeit - ד' תמוז

**אביגיל מלכה בת הרב משה
וחנה יהודית ע"ה**

Avigail (Poupko) Rock a”h

פיה פתחה בחכמה ותורת חסד על לשונה

*Rabbi Moshe & Chana Poupko
and Family*

The well which the chieftains dug,
Which the nobles of the people started
With the sceptre, and with their own staffs.
And from the wilderness to Mattanah,
and from Mattanah to Nahaliel,
and from Nahaliel to Bamoth..." (*Numbers*
21:16-19)

This is a much briefer song than the song that Moses led when the people of Israel miraculously crossed the Sea. But part of this passage too, at least in the synagogues with which I am familiar, is chanted melodically.

I have long been impressed by the fact that this week's Torah portion, in which the Song of the Well appears, describes a critical transition in the leadership of the Jewish people. From the time of the Exodus from Egypt, the Jewish people essentially have had three leaders: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. In this week's *parsha*, Miriam dies and is buried; Aaron too is "gathered unto his people" and is mourned; and Moses learns that his leadership role will come to an end sooner than he had thought, before the Jewish people enter the Promised Land.

This is indeed a story of transition, of the end of an era, of the passing of the mantle of leadership to a new generation.

No wonder then that the song sung in this week's *parsha* is so very different from the song sung by Moses at that triumphant moment near the beginning of his leadership career.

Our Sages tell us in the Talmudic tractate of *Sotah* that the Song of the Sea was sung by the people responsively. That is, Moses said the first phrase, which the people said after him. He proceeded then to the second phrase, and the people echoed him. Moses was an authoritative leader, and the people were obedient followers. Moses was the

active composer of the song, the choirmaster as it were, and the people were but the choir.

In this week's Torah portion, two of the leaders pass from the scene, and Moses learns that his leadership authority is waning. The Song of the Well is an entirely different leadership song from the Song of the Sea. In this week's song, the entire people sing as one. It begins not "Then Moses sang this song," but rather "Then Israel sang this song." The leadership passes from one Divinely chosen charismatic leader to the people as a whole.

The people find their voice, and it is the voice of song. How beautifully this is expressed in the Midrash *Yalkut Shimoni* (*Chukat* Note 764):

...after 40 years, the people finally matured and began to sing a song on their own accord, saying, "Master of the Universe, it is now incumbent upon You to do miracles for us and for us to sing, as it is written: 'It has pleased the Lord to deliver us and that is why we sing our song all the days of our lives...'" (*Isaiah* 38:20)

Jewish history has known epochs in which there were clear leaders, gifted and often charismatic individuals who, by virtue of their wisdom or heroism, seemed ordained by the Almighty Himself to lead our people. But we have also known times, such as the present, when such prominent leaders are not apparent.

It is at times such as these that we all must assume leadership responsibilities. It is at times such as these that we cannot afford to humbly refrain from acting as leaders in our own families and communities. It is at times such as these that we must, each of us, find our own voices and sing the songs of leadership. ■