

Echoes of Eden

Rabbi Ari Kahn

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Despair and Hope

At one time or another, anyone may feel overwhelmed, either due to work-related stress, conflict with co-workers, friends, one's spouse or children – or a combination of factors. For some people, problems have a way of metastasizing, spreading noxious despair that overtakes the more positive aspects of life. The pressures seem too much to handle; the problems seem insurmountable. At such times, we need to prioritize, to break down the tasks into manageable units and view them as individual challenges, in order to keep despair from overwhelming us.

Sometimes, we suffer from feelings of inadequacy because we operate under the illusion that other people have perfect lives. Just as our neighbor's lawn seems neat and trimmed and perfectly green, we think other peoples' entire lives are "greener" - more perfect, more well-adjusted. This misperception may be even more acute in terms of our spiritual heroes, whom we believe to be perfect in every way. The challenges experienced by the average person seem foreign to these great souls – at least in the hagiographic accounts of their lives.

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Perhaps this is why the words of desperation and despair uttered by the greatest of our prophets, Moshe, our teacher and leader, come as such a shock: "I cannot be responsible for this entire nation! It's too hard for me! If You are going to do this to me, just do me a favor and kill me..." (B'midbar 11:14-15). Perhaps this is just a turn of phrase, similar to the popular retort, "Just shoot me." However, just as one should not make such a flippant comment to a person holding a gun, it

may have been less than prudent for Moshe to say those words to God, who is perfectly and absolutely capable of fulfilling his request.

It seems that Moshe had reached the breaking point. In context, his despair is understandable: Moshe had just invited his father-in-law Hovev to join the Israelites' epic march to the Promised Land. After more than a year encamped at Sinai, the time had come to make their way to the Land of Israel. Moshe speaks in the present tense: "We are going to the Land that God has promised us." His excitement is palpable. We can almost hear the breathlessness of his anticipation as his great dream is about to come true. Unfortunately, he did not know what we, the readers, do: The bitter reality is that Moshe will not complete the triumphant march that is about to begin. He will not achieve the final goal; he will never enter the Land of Israel. And herein lies the rub: Profound disappointment is born of extreme expectations.

We may liken this to the disappointment experienced by a young person who goes on a seemingly successful first date, but does not get a call for a second date. However disheartening this may be, this disappointment cannot be compared to that of a bride or groom who has set a date for the wedding, reserved the hall, ordered the dress or stood for the final suit fitting – when the call comes that the wedding is off. Extreme excitement and anticipation transforms into devastating darkness. This is what Moshe experienced: He speaks in the present tense. He believes that all obstacles have been overcome, and the next stop is the Promised Land. And now, without warning, a litany of complaints causes him to understand that his dreams will be frustrated. Perhaps, as my late teacher Rabbi Yosef Soloveitchik suggested, Moshe had a premonition; perhaps it was something more concrete. Whatever the reasons that caused it, Moshe experienced the crushing fall from the height of his expectations – plummeting from "We are going," we are on our way to fulfilling our destiny – to the disheartening reality that he faced. The march to the Land of

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Israel that ignited his spirit and filled him with joy was a trip Moshe would not complete. The three-day journey would take years, an entire generation – and he would not live to see it completed.

Depression comes when dreams disintegrate, degenerating into a debilitating nightmare.

Moshe's plea is an expression of despair. He knows deep inside that he will fail, and this sudden realization is crippling. Why should he carry on? Why continue the charade of leadership if he will not complete his task? Nonetheless, God stands by his side. Rather than accepting Moshe's pleas and "putting him out of his misery," God responds: If you cannot do this alone, I will provide you with help.

Perhaps this is a lesson for us all. When we feel overwhelmed, when we want to say, "Just shoot me," free me from this burden, release me from responsibilities I am incapable of living up to, our prayer should be, "God, please give me strength. Please send me help, and please stand by me. Together, we will accomplish what you placed me on earth to achieve."

For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/06/audio-and-essays-parashat-bahaalotcha.html>