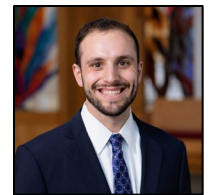


How Does Moses Cope When Expectations Fall Short?

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All of us have been in situations when we feel something has fallen short of our expectations. Even trivial things, such as a favorite sports team underperforming, a dessert missing the mark, or a train running late can cause significant frustration. Just imagine the disappointment or sadness one can feel when a much more important matter fails to go as hoped. Moses finds himself in this situation in this week's parashah, as God's promise to free the Israelites has yet to fully play out. How does Moses cope with the fact that his expectations have not yet been met? One especially challenging section of our parashah offers a clue.

Before the Israelites have been freed and Moses announces the final plague, God makes a prediction in Exodus 11:1-3 that seems completely unattainable:

“And Adonai said to Moses, “I will bring but one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; after that he shall let you go from here; indeed, when he lets you go, he will drive you out of here one and all. Tell the people to borrow, each man from his neighbor and each woman from hers, objects of silver and gold. Adonai disposed the Egyptians favorably toward the people. Moreover, Moses himself was much esteemed in the land of Egypt, among Pharaoh's courtiers and among the people” (Exod. 11:1-3).

Is this to say that after the devastating plagues and Pharaoh hardening his heart, the Egyptians all of a sudden will treat the Israelites “favorably”? That Moses, the key figure in the destruction of Egypt, will become its most adored leader? At this point in the narrative, this vision could not be farther from the reality on the ground. In the verses that follow,

Moses must snap back to reality to deliver the most devastating news a parent can ever hear to Pharaoh, that God will soon exact the Plague of the Firstborn.

Biblical scholar Robert Alter also struggles with the narrative purpose of these three verses, observing that they “do not seem smoothly integrated into the narrative progress” (Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: The Five Books of Moses*, 257). He points out that chapter ten concludes with Moses saying he will never see Pharaoh's face again (Exod. 10:29), yet Moses appears before Pharaoh in verses 11:4-8 to announce the final plague. He cites Umberto Cassuto, the 20th-century Italian and Israeli Biblical scholar, “who sees it as kind of a flashback in Moses's mind—of God's initial promise to confound Egypt and to liberate Israel before the annunciation of the last plague” (ibid.).

Indeed, Moses had good reason to expect favorable treatment and great wealth. At the Burning Bush, God assured Moses that God “will dispose the Egyptians favorably toward this people, so that when you go, you will not go away empty handed” (Exod. 3:21). God even promised Abraham that God “will execute judgement on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth” (Gen. 15:14). Sometimes when real-life is hard, visualizing a more ideal reality for a few seconds can help us feel grounded. Perhaps this “flashback,” which validates the valiant and just nature of Moses's original intentions, and certainty of God's promise, helped him cope with disappointing feelings from unmet expectations of freedom. That short dream keeps Moses's eyes on the prize, reminding him to do whatever it takes get his people to the finish line, even if it may not look exactly the way he dreamed it.

Moses falls short of his goals many times as a leader: he probably asks Pharaoh to let the Israelites go at least a dozen times before he succeeds in securing his people's freedom. Moses's ability to "flashback" to a vision of a better future powers his relentless drive. Psychologist Angela Duckworth would call this [grit](#), "passion and perseverance for long-term goals . . . a goal you care about so much that it organizes and gives meaning to almost everything you do." In order to maintain his grit in a moment where reality has yet to meet his expectations, Moses takes a second to reflect and dream about the better future that he and his ancestors have worked tirelessly to procure.

We can learn from Moses when our own lives take unexpected turns. By keeping himself grounded in the bigger picture, Moses helps the Israelites endure the slow path to redemption. While this is no antidote, taking a step back to remind ourselves about our larger goals can provide a temporary spark of motivation or sigh of relief.

Shabbat Shalom.