

A Teaching from Rabbi Weintraub:

Your Heart and Your Mouth

Shabbat B'ha'a'lotcha | 21 Sivan; June 12-13, 2009

Any parent, employer, managing partner, teacher, coach or other person who has responsibility for others can draw comfort from the example of Moses. As he leads the Israelites, he puts up with murmurings, slander, organized rebellions, idolatry, and more. While he does have a temper (remember the broken tablets), he is generally able to bear problems and soldier on.

In this week's Torah Portion, however, Moshe cracks. The people complain about manna, the miraculous food which drops from Heaven, and imply that they want to go back to Egypt: "We remember the fish that we ate...free of charge, the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onion and garlic". (Numbers 11:4-5). Moses sinks then into despair, crying to G-d "why have You dealt ill with your servant...I cannot carry this entire people, for it is too heavy for me. If this is how you must deal with me, then kill me now!" (Ibid, verses 11, 14 and 15).

What was there about these complaints that crushed Moses's spirit? Noting some unusual wording in the text, Rashi decides out that what the people really desired was not the diet of Egypt – which was likely miserable – but the sexual license, which permitted even incestuous relationships. The complaint about the food was a cover for this craving, which the people were too ashamed to admit.

Moses, then, lost it not because of the people's attraction to Egypt, or rejection of their mission, but because of their dishonesty. In Jewish ethics, truth is seen as foundational to a good life. If we can lie openly to others, we will also lie to ourselves. If we justify an action on some pretense, we will eventually come to believe the pretense. The Talmud (Pesachim 113b), in listing things that G-d hates, includes "he who speaks one thing with his mouth and another thing in his heart". Hypocrisy is pernicious because the hypocrite comes to believe his own cover-ups. For example, most of us offer to do favors so that others will regard us positively even when we are not at all sure if we will follow through: "Give me a ring if I can help". "Sure, I can get you a ride" "Give me some time to research it" When we are not sure if we can or will deliver, it's better to be quiet. We will gain a better reputation by following through, even occasionally, than for promising big as a rule. And we will be moved to acknowledge any insincerity in our motives, which is the first step in correcting ourselves and purifying our relationships.