

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Chukat, Numbers, Chapters 19-22 | July 13, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Moses vs. Machiavelli

And here comes in the question whether it is better to be loved rather than feared, or feared rather than loved. It might perhaps be answered that we should wish to be both; but since love and fear can hardly exist together, if we must choose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved.

So wrote Niccolò Machiavelli in his famous work *The Prince*. Of course, from a biblical political perspective, this advice does not describe a political ideal: the Jewish leader ought to live, and lead, neither to be feared nor loved, but rather to draw people to admiration and love of God and to inspire awe at the role the Almighty asks His covenantal people to play in His Providential plan. In so doing, a leader must draw on his own inner love for the covenantal people he leads. That is why the conclusion drawn in *The Prince*, insightful though it may be, is foreign to the Torah: Machiavelli takes as his starting point an entirely different relationship between the leader and the people. In an interesting essay about *The Prince*, the educator Seth Woodley notes that if Machiavelli counsels that a politics of fear is the safest bet, it is because he believed, as Machiavelli himself put it,

One can make this generalization about men: they are ungrateful, fickle, liars, and deceivers, they shun danger and are greedy for profit . . .

This is why, as Woodley explains, a leader, for Machiavelli, must utilize power above all in order to lead:

The deep-seated wickedness within the heart of man forces the ruler to strike fear into his people, though, Machiavelli argues, not in such a way as to arouse hatred.

Machiavelli proposes that rulers can be either “armed prophets” or “unarmed prophets.” An “armed prophet” is a leader who rules by force, while an “unarmed prophet” is one who has no way of directly forcing his rule on his subjects. Machiavelli argues that a leader who cannot force his will upon the people can never be successful. An unarmed prophet is doomed to despair because, according to Machiavelli, charismatic leadership or non-violent leadership can never have enduring power. Eventually, a prince, no matter how greatly admired, will eventually fall out of popularity.

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Machiavelli's distinction between the "armed prophet" and the "unarmed prophet" should be of particular interest to readers of our *parashah*. In this reading, the career of Moses, the greatest of prophets, comes to a close as he wields the force of power, literally in his arm, and is as a result chastised by the Almighty. It is therefore Machiavelli who can help us to understand better our *parashah*—and the nature of leadership itself.

Chukat begins not with the theme of leadership, but rather with a mysterious cultic ritual: the creation of the ashes of the red heifer, the sole source of purification for those who have come into contact with a dead body. The precise details of the ritual, and why this, and this alone, cleanses the impurity of death, has been discussed at length in Bible 365 (you can find a link to that episode as well as a transcript of it below). For now, let us ponder why it is at this point in the Pentateuch that this ritual relating to death appears. The answer, for Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, lies in the fact that, following the sin of the spies, the Israelites have been wandering, and dying, in the desert for 40 years. The miasma of death is everywhere: that is why a source of purification from death is offered.

Understanding this fact, in turn, helps us to approach the psychological state of the people; even the leaders of Israel themselves, we are informed, are affected by the death of one they love:

And the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh; and Miriam died there, and was buried there. (Numbers 20:1)

Miriam, a remarkable prophet in her own right, who was so central to Moses' life, passes away. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observed how difficult this must have been for Moses:

It is hard to lose a parent, but in some ways it is even harder to lose a brother or sister. They are your generation. You feel the Angel of Death come suddenly close. You face your own mortality.

Miriam was more than a sister to Moses. She was the one, while still a child, to follow the course of the wicker basket holding her baby brother as it drifted down the Nile. She had the courage and ingenuity to approach Pharaoh's daughter and suggest that she employ a Hebrew nurse for the child, thus ensuring that Moses would grow up knowing his family, his people, and his identity. . . . Moses had lost his sister, who had watched over him as a child, guided his development, supported him throughout the years, and helped him carry the burden of leadership in her role as leader of the women.

Immediately after Miriam's death, a well-known but opaque tale unfolds:

Now there was no water for the congregation; and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. And the people contended with Moses, and said, Would that we had died when our brethren died before the Lord! (Numbers 20:2–3)

It is not hard to understand Moses' dismay. This was, as many commentators note, the new generation; he had every reason to hope that the complaints of their parents would be left in the past. At this point, the Almighty gives Moses instructions:



Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the door of the tent of meeting, and fell on their faces. And the glory of the Lord appeared to them.

It is not hard to understand Moses' dismay. This was, as many commentators note, the new generation; he had every reason to hope that the complaints of their parents would be left in the past.

And the Lord said to Moses, Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water; so you shall bring water out of the rock for them; so you shall give drink to the congregation and their cattle. And Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as he commanded him.

And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, Hear now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock? And Moses lifted up his hand, and struck the rock with his rod twice; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their cattle. (Numbers 20:6–11)

According to the great commentator Rashi, and many others, Moses was asked by the Almighty to **speak** to the rock, rather than strike it, and it was through this use of force that Moses disobeyed God's command. This appears to be the implication of the verse that follows:

And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, Because you did not believe in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them. (Numbers 20:12)

The story remains mystifying, as it is not clear why this one act would result in Moses losing his leadership role.

To make sense of it, we have to begin with the object that Moses holds in his hand, with which he struck the rock. Which staff is it? As the medieval exegete Rashbam (Rabbi Samuel ben Meir) notes, the text emphasizes that this staff is the one that lies "before the Lord." This, he argues, is the rod described in last week's reading, which tells of Korah's rebellion against the selection of Aaron as high priest. The complaints of the people are followed by terrifying punishments: fire, plague, the opening of the earth. Then, toward the end of that *parashah*, Aaron's status is affirmed by something else entirely: a miracle concerning his staff. We read last week:

Moses spoke to the people of Israel, and all their leaders gave him rods, one for each leader, according to their fathers' house, twelve rods; and the rod of Aaron was among their rods. And Moses deposited the rods before the Lord in the tent of the testimony.



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And on the morrow Moses went into the tent of the testimony; and, behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted, and put forth buds, and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds. Then Moses brought out all the rods from before the Lord to all the people of Israel; and they looked, and each man took his rod. And the Lord said to Moses, Put back the rod of Aaron before the testimony, to be kept as a sign for the rebels, that you may make an end of their murmurings against me, lest they die. (Numbers 17:6–10)

It is not the punishments that bring the story of Korah to a close, but rather the flowering of a staff. As Rabbi Chanoch Waxman insightfully argues, this conclusion signifies that ultimately Israel is turned back to the proper path not only through emphasis on the negative, but also on the spiritually positive:

The miracle of the staff is in some sense the opposite of the miracles of divine fire, the opening of the earth and the plague. As opposed to turning life into death, it turns death into life. The dry wood of the staff springs back to life, it flowers, buds and blossoms, giving forth almonds, where before only lifeless wood had been present. . . . It is meant to show that God’s leadership, as manifested through Moshe and Aharon, is in fact meant to lead to life.

This is the staff that Moses is asked to hold as he speaks to the rock, rather than strike it, bringing forth thereby life-giving waters; the point, as Rabbi Waxman argues, is that Moses was intended by the Almighty to emphasize not power and fear, but inspiration and awe, love and life. This, of course, is the opposite of Machiavelli’s approach. As Woodley puts it, for Machiavelli, a prince

will never be able to bring all those in his domain to love him; it is beyond his control. However, he is able to determine to what extent his subjects fear him. Therefore, he writes, “So, on this question of being loved or feared, I conclude that since some men love as they please but fear when the prince pleases, a wise prince should rely on what he controls, not on what he cannot control. He must only endeavor, as I said, to escape being hated.” Machiavelli’s principle: make them fear you because you cannot make them love you.

This is exactly the advice that the Bible rejects. In striking the rock, rather than summoning the inspiration embodied by Aaron’s staff, Moses emphasizes power over inspiration and love. In so doing, as Rabbi Waxman notes, Moses “sends the message that . . . [t]he leadership of Moshe and Aharon, and by implication God . . . rests upon power, force and the threat of death.” At this point, with the new generation of Israelites, Moses seems to have deemed it as made up, in his words, of “rebels.” But the truth is that we know from the Book of Joshua that this generation was not doomed to rebellion; indeed, the period of Moses’ successor was, relatively, a golden age in Jewish history. And thus this moment at the rock is taken by God as a sign that new leadership is required. Moses and Aaron must make way for Joshua.

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The greatest of leaders can become deeply disappointed with the people they lead. When Winston Churchill was, astonishingly, voted out of office by the people of Great Britain as soon as the danger of Nazism had passed, with the Second World War not yet concluded, Clementine Churchill reflected to her husband: “Perhaps it is a blessing in disguise.” And Churchill responded with something to the effect of, “If so, it is very well disguised.”

In the end, no period of leadership lasts forever: great leaders have moments that define them, and ultimately Churchill’s legacy is bound up in the way in which he rallied the people during Britain’s “darkest hour.” In a similar way, Abraham Lincoln’s leadership is remembered above all for the way that he turned America toward a deeper self-understanding, which is why his Second Inaugural is his greatest speech. And then there is Menachem Begin, who gave what I have called his greatest speech during a political campaign—a very unusual occurrence in the history of political rhetoric. Responding to the bigotry of a celebrity who had spoken in a derogatory fashion about Jews from Middle Eastern countries, Begin encouraged the people he led to realize, and embrace, the bonds they shared. Even as he scored points against political opponents, Begin urged his people to embrace inspiration, love, and reverence for Jewish history.

And, of course, as we remember Moses, we remember above all his love for his people: the people he embraced when he could have remained in the palace of Pharaoh; the people he defended when they incurred the wrath of God; the people with whom he threw his own lot again and again. Moses was *not* Machiavelli, and he was not Machiavellian; that is why he is so revered. We remember him, above all, not for the power he wielded with his hands, but rather for the love of his people that he held in his heart.

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Additional Resources

Rabbi Soloveichik on the Red Heifer (Podcast), “The Mount of Olives and Jewish Immortality,” *Bible 365*, August 27, 2021. [Click here to read.](#)

Rabbi Soloveichik on the Red Heifer (Text), “The Mount of Olives and Jewish Immortality,” *Numbers Weekly*, July 7, 2022. [Click here to read.](#)

Rabbi Chanoch Waxman on the Sin of Moses, “Of Sticks and Stones,” *Studies in Parashat HaShavua with Rav Chanoch Waxman*, March 29, 2017. [Click here to read.](#)

