

LIFE IN THE WILDERNESS
Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro (VA)
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I am going to begin my talk this morning by re-telling an ancient story from the Bible and then invite you to join me in reflecting on how we might apply its wisdom to the present. The historical setting for this lesson is the Israelites' exodus from captivity in Egypt and their long sojourn in the wilderness before they reached the Promised Land in Palestine. For the Israelites, this was both the best of times and the worst of times. Under the leadership of Moses and with the divine intervention of their God known to them as Yahweh, they had narrowly escaped from their Egyptian oppressors and now faced an uncertain future.

The list of divine interventions by Yahweh on behalf of his chosen people is impressive. Whether we consider them as fact or as legend is not crucial to my discussion today. Instead, I would like to use the story of the Israelites in the wilderness as an **allegory**, in which the characters and events represent issues that are as relevant today as they were then. Let me refresh your memory about this dramatic story. When the Egyptian Pharaoh refused Moses' request that he release the Israelites from captivity, Yahweh set in motion a series of horrible natural disasters: the Ten Plagues. After each successive plague, Moses gave Pharaoh the opportunity to relent, but in spite of the suffering of his people, Pharaoh refused.

"The last plague was the death of Egypt's firstborn, both humans and animals. It was the culmination of the series and the most devastating, and it compelled Pharaoh to [finally] let the Israelites go. The Israelites avoided the tenth plague because each family slaughtered a lamb as a substitute for its firstborn. They painted blood from the sacrificed lamb on the door frames of their homes, and when God saw this evidence, he 'passed over' that house, sparing the firstborn son. . . . The avoidance ritual of the tenth plague developed into a ceremonial meal called Passover, or *pesach* ["PAY-sock"] in Hebrew.

"After leaving Egypt, the Israelites fled into the Sinai Peninsula. Pharaoh had second thoughts about allowing them to depart, so he mustered his chariotry and gave chase. . . . After a short time, the Israelites were pinched between Pharaoh's army and the **Reed** Sea. . . . Although translations and maps still use the designation **Red** Sea, the biblical text actually says **Reed** Sea. As Old Testament scholar Barry Bandstra explains, "The Israelites, as was their tendency, blamed Moses for their predicament. But then, when all hope seemed lost, by [still] another divine act the Israelites escaped through the sea on dry ground and the army of Pharaoh drowned when they tried to follow. This escape is [one of the most] important events in Israel's history. It is the culmination of [Yahweh's] great work in delivering the Israelites from oppression and bondage and providing salvation. Forever it would be remembered as the event that revealed both the compassion and power of Israel's God. Its significance to the religious faith of Israel cannot be overestimated." [Barry S. Bandra, *Reading the Old Testament*, pp. 124-26, commenting on Exodus, chaps. 5-15]

Now you might think that the combination of Moses' courageous leadership and Yahweh's dramatic intervention on their behalf would by now have solidified the Israelites' faith in both their human leader and their tribal deity. But you would be mistaken. Whenever they experience adversity, the Israelites continue to demonstrate their lack of faith and commitment. When they run out of food, they complain to Moses and his brother Aaron, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." [Exodus 16:3] Moses negotiates still another divine intervention: *manna* from heaven to placate his restless followers. When they ran out of water, the same complaint arose from the people: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst? So Moses cried out to the Lord, 'What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.'" [Exodus 17:3-4] Once again, Yahweh offers a miraculous solution—this time one that demonstrates Moses' powers, when he strikes a rock and water gushes forth.

The ultimate test of the Israelites' commitment to Yahweh and to his chosen leader Moses takes place when Moses leaves the people at the base of Mount Sinai for forty days and ascends to the top of the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. Do you recall what happens next? [pause] Impatient with Moses' longer than expected absence and **still** uncertain about their commitment to the deity who has repeatedly rescued them, the Israelites turn to Aaron and ask for his help in constructing an alternative god in the form of a golden calf. "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." [Exodus 32:1] Feeling the pressure to relieve their anxiety—and perhaps yielding to his own desire for their approval, Aaron readily agrees to help them construct the idol. When Moses returns from the mountaintop and confronts his brother, Aaron offers one of the earliest recorded examples of **spin control**. "You know the people, they are bent on evil," and he denies the active role he played in shaping the melted gold into the shape of a golden calf. [Exodus 32:22]

I share this biblical story with you because it illustrates the precarious relationship between leaders and followers in **any system**, whether that system is a chosen people or a nation or a congregation. Followers often expect more of their leaders than the leaders can deliver. Leaders often expect more of themselves than they can deliver. And the mutual commitment between leaders and followers can fall apart under conditions of scarcity, stress, or uncertainty. Peter Steinke is a widely respected congregational consultant. His most recent book is titled *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*, in which he uses the example of Moses and Aaron to illustrate the different ways that leaders and followers respond to the challenges they face. There are basically three different ways to respond to the anxiety that these conditions generate in both leaders and followers.

The first possible response is **denial**. Act as if everything is OK or will be soon. Avoid the potential conflicts that might come to the surface if we confront our unresolved problems. Ask followers to trust leaders to figure out what to do. In the case of the Israelites in the wilderness, this was not a viable option. Their challenges were immediate and undeniable: a pursuing army, lack of food and water, prolonged absence of their leader. The second possible response to a significant challenge is a **quick-fix solution**. This was Aaron's approach. Partly in reaction to the Israelites' desire for relief from their anxiety—but also to relieve his own

anxiety—Aaron offers a quick fix: a tangible god the people can worship immediately without sacrificing their desires, rather than an indistinct God who makes demands on them.

The third possible response to challenging circumstances is the one represented by Moses: **steadfastness—persistence toward a long-term goal in the face of adversity and conflict.** In the words of Peter Steinke, “Moses has the ability to stay connected with people even when they are emotionally upset. . . . He has the courage to keep going forward in spite of wretched conditions and critical opposition. . . . Moses represents the leader who is willing to challenge. Aaron portrays the leader who does what is necessary to survive, lets whatever the polls say determine his behavior, and maintains stability even it means losing self.” [p. 145-46] Popular impatience for quick solutions makes the life of steadfast leaders difficult and sometimes downright discouraging. Even someone like Moses can get so frustrated that he breaks the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments have been inscribed.

During the forty years of their life in the wilderness between exodus and arrival, the people of Israel were sustained by their **covenant** with Yahweh, who promised them a land flowing with milk and honey in exchange for their allegiance to his commandments. When they strayed from their covenant with Yahweh, they suffered disastrous consequences, culminating in their exile in Babylon in spite of the warnings of the Old Testament prophets. The concept of covenant in the Unitarian Universalist faith has a different meaning. Our covenant is with **one another**. It calls us to maintain faithful commitment to one another. This mutual covenant is not spelled out in a list of commandments, nor is it founded on the fear of divine retribution. Our covenant is based instead on our relationship with one another. It is lived out in how we treat one another in spite of our differences, including our willingness to engage one another in dialogue in a spirit of **mutual respect and tolerance.**

As we face the challenges ahead of us as a Fellowship, we must resist the temptations of both **denial** and **quick-fix solutions.** We must practice the discipline of our covenant of dialogue and mutual respect. And above all, we must sustain our belief in a Promised Land. Let me close with the words of W. E. B. Dubois: “The prayer of our souls is a petition for persistence, not for the one good deed, or single thought, but deed on deed, and thought on thought, until day calling unto day shall make a life worth living.”

HYMN # 128 “For All That Is Our Life”

CLOSING WORDS # 456 (Lay Leader - in unison)