

Rabbi's Column

This week's Torah Portion contains many instances of people behaving badly, or at least complaining at the wrong time.

Miriam and Aaron both die - so we have jumped from the second year of the journey a couple of weeks ago to the final years of the journey - and catastrophe results. When Miriam dies, the traveling wells revert back to their normal invisible status. The people (who should be prepared to find water on their own by now) complain to Moses while he should be in the period of Shivah concerning this. So he angrily gives them what they want, and God latches onto this as a reason to take back the gift of Aaron and Moses' life. There are arguments for and against each set of actions in this part of the tale.

Then Aaron dies, and a neighboring King decides to take advantage of the situation by attacking the Israelites while they were in mourning. This did not turn out well for him.

There does seem to be a pattern here.

Yet I think the differences are more important than the commonalities.

When a person tactically takes advantage of the difficulties of somebody else, then they accept the full blame for what is done, both to the victim and to themselves. When shirt-tail relatives are being uncaring, unthinking, obnoxious individuals, somehow believing that their problems are the only important ones, then even during moments of grief or turmoil a person is obligated to be polite. If we do not have the power to resolve their difficulty, then politeness is the limit of our obligation. Expressing our anger at them for not having worked on their own personal development (so that they would know that now was not a good time) gives them control over our reactions. Not really a good thing. When we have the power to resolve their difficulty, then politely doing so on our own schedule seems the best way to help a family member out, not give them power over our reactions, and perhaps get them to think about developing a bit of empathy.

So - try not to be the obnoxious one, which requires an understanding of the problems another person is going through. Try to be polite to the obnoxious one, which, if successful, makes you a bit better at anger management than Moses. Realize that if you do get upset and express that, you are at least in good company - that of God and Moses.