

Leadership challenges Numbers 11 24 30

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Presidents come and go every four or eight years. Pictures of them as enthusiastic campaigners on the trail, airbrushed or not, display vigorous, hale and hearty candidates, ready for any challenges they may face if elected.

With rare exception, pictures taken at the end of their terms of office tell a different story. Gray of hair—if they have any—and drawn of face, they look exhausted, often undernourished, ready finally for a long nap and some time in the sun, preferably with refreshment at hand. Leadership is almost always taxing, but the presidency of a nation must be among the most demanding.

No wonder that Moses, when first summoned and commissioned back in Exodus 3–4, moaned like an anachronistic country singer, “Take this job and shove it.” He didn’t want the job back then—but he couldn’t have conceived that besting old No-Name Pharaoh and His Eager Egyptians wouldn’t even be the hardest part.

Once on the road to the storied promised land, our Moses must have thought his labors nearly over. Not remotely.

Not for nothing is a sizable chunk of the Torah referred to as “Murmuring in the Wilderness.” Murmuring his charges did. And grumbled and complained and protested, deriding him, his plans, and now and again his God who’d dragged them out into the middle of nowhere.

The complaint *du jour* is about food. Manna every day, for crying out loud. Can’t we have a little variety, or is that too much to ask? Which reminds them of the great meals on which they used to dine in Merry Olde Egypt. Really? As slaves?

God, who rarely leaves his boy Moses in the lurch before providing a variety of vittles, proposes that Moses get help in the form of a council of elders, properly vetted, of course, who can share the burdens of leadership and authority. An early and way-over-the-top version of the modern vestry or pastor's select committee or diocesan commission, methinks. They may, however, have a cautionary clue in tow for leaders several millennia removed.

The spirit with which Moses has been endowed must have been a wowzer, because when God takes some of that same spirit and "puts it on them," this causes them to, as the English translation says, "prophesy." The Hebrew is a bit stronger. The strength of the verb portrays something impassioned, a physical and emotional response to the irresistible presence of the Spirit of God.

Curiously, they've hardly started when they abruptly stop. Meanwhile, back in the camp, Eldad and Medad, apparently—horrors!—not properly credentialed, are also invested with the spirit and do their own prophesying, with no mention of any stoppage.

Apparently it's wise to do a thorough background check of people put forward for leadership. But leadership with no opportunity for the spirit to speak, inspire, question, and be heard is doomed to be misled, misinformed, too focused on credentials and insider knowledge and "the way we've always done things." Community is best served when there's room for both.