

Illuminating Man's Inner World

THROUGH THE LENS OF THE PARSHA

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Parshas Shemos – The Eternal Model of Leadership (i.e – Can we make America and the World Great Again)

I wrote this before the events on Wednesday in the Capitol. I fully believed the words that I wrote on Tuesday and even more so in light of recent events.

One of the predominant themes of 2020 both in the U.S and in Eretz Yisroel was the question of leadership. Who is most fit to lead? What are the characteristics that we seek in choosing a leader? Which factors should be prioritized, and which are secondary and not given full heed? While what has been front and center in our consciousness are the elections for President and Prime Minister, leadership is in fact needed in every institution, community, and family. The question is one of all importance. What qualities mark a person - President, spiritual leader, boss, or parent - as someone who is best suited to lead?

More ink has been spent on this topic than one can shake a proverbial stick at, but for us one needs to look no further than the handful of pesukim that describe the ascension of Moshe Rabbeinu to the role of the unquestioned leader of the Jewish people both in his epoch and in any epoch since. We know so little about his early life so the few 'crumbs' that we are provided with are seized upon with great relish.

Let us mention a few well known sources that paint the picture. The first time we have any exposure to the grown Moshe, the Torah records that:

וַיְהִי בְּיָמֵים הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אַחֵיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסַבְלָתָם וַיֵּרָא
אִישׁ מִצְרִי מַכֵּה אִישׁ-עִבְרִי מֵאַחָיו:

Sometime after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his brethren and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren. (Shmos 2:11)

Rashi, quoting the Medrash, highlights that the word וירא is not some simple act of seeing. Rather:

וירא בסבלתם. נתן עיניו ולבו להיות מצר עליהם

AND HE SAW THEIR BURDENS — he set his eyes and mind to share in their distress.

This is an act described by the ba'alei Mussar as ha'aras panim - completely seeing and empathizing with another person.

What happens after he sees this Egyptian striking his fellow Jew?

וַיֵּרָא כֹּה וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ וַיִּרְאֵתְהֶם צָרוֹ וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַּחֹל:

These words 'and he saw that there was no man' have been a source of debate for the last millennia. Famously Rashi said that it means that Moshe 'saw' that no Jew would ever emanate from this Mitzri in the future. The Netziv said that what it means is that Moshe saw that there was no one to appeal to on behalf of this besieged-upon Jew. There was no one to turn to who would adjudicate the issue fairly.

The Ramban took a simpler and I believe a more resonant approach and said that:

והנה נסתכל בסבלותם ועמלם ולא יכול לסבול ולכן הרג המצרי המכה הנלחץ:

Moshe saw their suffering and saw that there was no one else to jump into the fray. With that middah of empathy and inability to tolerate cruelty he stood up and smote the Mitzri.

As we continue along Moshe's journey this theme continues to emerge -namely Moshe's inability to watch oppression and not in some way to get involved. Whether it was his desire to break up the conflict between the two Jews in Mitzraim or in his advocacy for the daughters of Yisro in Midian, Moshe was simply unable to watch cruelty from the sidelines. This middah blends seamlessly into his chosen profession upon arriving in Midian - that of a shepherd.

The Be'er Mayim Chaim in quoting the famous Medrash says the following:

ומשה היה רועה את צאן יתרו חותנו וגו'. הודיע הכתוב מאין זכה משה להיות הוא השליח לישראל והוא אשר יוציאם יביאם, לרעות את עם ה', והוא לאשר היה רועה נאמן בצאן חותנו ברחמים מרובים כמאמר חז"ל (שמות רבה ב, ב) שפעם אחת ברח ממנו גדי אחד ורץ אחריו וכו' נדמנה לו בריכה של מים ועמד הגדי לשתות כיון שהגיע משה אצלו אמר אני לא הייתי יודע שרץ היית מפני הצמא עיף אתה הרכיבו על כתיו והוא מהלך אמר הקב"ה יש לך רחמים לנהוג צאנו של בשר ודם כך, חיך אתה תרעה את צאני וכו', עד כאן. הרי שממש זכה לרעות כצאן עמו.

While the entire Medrash is beyond beautiful and paints the exact picture that allows one to understand who Moshe Rabbeinu was, the key concept is that Moshe was chosen to be the future leader of G-d's people because of the care and empathy that he demonstrated towards the gentlest and most helpless of creations. The line is worth repeating in that it describes the precise Jewish ethic that informs not just appropriate leadership but general behavior and outlook –

אמר הקב"ה יש לך רחמים לנהוג צאנו של בשר ודם כך, חיך אתה תרעה את צאני וכו', עד כאן. הרי שממש זכה לרעות כצאן עמו.

Lastly, one reflects on the choice of a thornbush as the vehicle of revelation to Moshe Rabbeinu. This was the beginning of the grandest moment in Jewish History and it began in the most inauspicious of places. The medrash records a number of reasons for this choice. One explanation that has always caught my eye was in the Mechilta:

ד"א למה מתוך הסנה ר' אלעזר בן ערך אומר מפני מה נגלה הקב"ה משמי מרום והיה מדבר עם משה מתוך הסנה לפי שיכול המקום שידבר מראש הרים ומראש הגבעות מגבהי עולם ומאדרי לבנון אלא השפיל עצמו ודבר מתוך הסנה ועליו אמר שלמה (משלי כ"ט כ"ג) ושפל רוח יתמוך כבוד: אי אתה מוצא מן האילנות שפל מן הסנה וכן הוא אומר (תהלים קל"ח ו') כי רם ד' ושפל יראה.

HKB'H could have spoken from anywhere and from any vehicle. The choice of the thornbush was a way of communicating the necessity of humility in whoever is chosen to lead the people. This is a theme that will be revisited throughout the Torah - Moshe's humility as a prerequisite for leadership.

While there is no shortage of other themes that are required in a leader and that Moshe himself demonstrated - integrity, strength of character, unafraid

to make unpopular decisions, honesty etc. the initial point of emphasis is empathy and humility, kindness and ego-restraint.

Why are these the middos most emphasized in Moshe Rabbeinu and in arguably all future Jewish leaders? On a simple level the answer is obvious. A leader who is not empathetic and who is led by his own ego-driven needs eventually uses his power to serve his own ends and for his own self-aggrandizement. But it is really more than that. Effective leadership is when there is complete identification between a leader and his people. An entity be it a family or a country is an organism in which the leader plays a primary role but is at the same time completely integrated into that whole. There is a love and an identification felt by the leader for his people which is in turn reciprocated by the people's feelings for the leader. That can only happen with empathy, with respect for the entire populace and with a genuine spirit of humility. Most importantly, the leaders who cultivate that spirit and that identification truly elevate the national character.

Clearly Moshe Rabbeinu understood and cultivated this unique, empathetic, and respectful relationship between the leader and the עם. The Ramban (Bamidbar 16:1) points out that Korach's rebellion could have only taken place after the sin of the spies once the national mood had been dampened, because prior to that the nation loved Moshe in the way that a child loves a mother and could not have fathomed rebelling against him. Furthermore, the Ramban (Bamidbar 1:1) notes that one of the purposes of doing a census was so that Moshe Rabbeinu could personally interact with every member of Am Yisroel.

At some point seemingly the feeling of complete identification between Moshe and the nation became threatened. The Rambam (in Hilchos Dei'os and in Shemoneh Perakim) claims that Moshe's sin at mei merivah was that he angrily rebuked the people - שמעו - listen to me you rebellious ones. When it became clear that even Moshe had reached his limit and that his ability to empathetically elevate the nation had perhaps run its course then HKB'H decided that a change in leadership was necessary.

A particularly profound line in Berachos 28a always struck me as underscoring this dynamic between a leader and his/her subjects. The gemarah records how the Nasi Rabban Gamliel had entered into a public

dispute with R' Yehoshua and how Rabban Gamliel had embarrassed his talmudic adversary. When Rabban Gamliel, who came from wealthy nobility, entered into Rebbe Yehoshua's somewhat dilapidated home to ask him for forgiveness, Rabban Gamliel made a comment that indicated that he wasn't really aware of the type of life choices that someone of Rebbe Yehoshua's economic status was forced to make. Rebbe Yehoshua responds sharply that

**אוי לו לדור שאתה פּרנסו, שאי אתה יודע בצערך של תלמיד
חכמים, בנה הם מתפרנסים ובהם הם נזונים.**

Essentially saying that woe onto this generation that you have been entrusted to lead for you have no true understanding of the struggles of the people.

Rav Kook on that gemarah expresses the following beautiful formulation

**הנהגת הדור הראויה צריכה להיות שהמנהיג ישתדל לחדור
למצבו של כל יחיד לפי כחו. ובמה שישתדל לתקן גם כן כל
המצבים הפרטיים יתרומם מצב הכלל כולו.**

A leader may have many qualities but first and foremost does he love, empathize with, deeply understand, and fully respect the totality of the people who he serves? If not, then **אוי לו לדור שאתה פּרנסו**.

As the gemarah forcefully notes:

**תנו רבנן שלשה הקב"ה בוכה עליהן בכל יום על שאפשר
לעסוק בתורה ואינו עוסק ועל שאי אפשר לעסוק בתורה
ועוסק ועל פרנס המתגאה על הצבור**

HKB'H cries daily when he sees a parnes (a leader) lordling over the community (Chagigah 5b)

Even leaving aside the countless models in Tanach and from Chazal, we as Americans and as Jews have been blessed to witness many leaders who reflect what I believe to be the Torah's vision of leadership. Abraham Lincoln might be the greatest example of such a person but there have been many others. Men and women of decency and idealism who were completely connected to the nation and to the people who they served and who, because of that identification, were able to elevate the entire national consciousness. David Ben Gurion and Menachem Begun were flawed human beings but at the same time they were genuinely great men who brought out the best, most noble and most selfless

spirit in their countrymen. None of these people, G-d forbid, can be compared to Moshe Rabbeinu but in their ability to identify with, be identified with, and passionately elevate the people they found similarities with the greatest of our leaders.

It is just my humble opinion but to unapologetically, unabashedly, and loudly support candidates who fly in the face of the Torah's eternal values of empathy, humility, nobility, and integrity seems like an inadvertent sidelining and disgrace of the Torah. The unintended message would seem to be that the domain of the Torah exists only in some black and white area of halakha as opposed to being a Toras Chaim that informs every piece of our lives. Very simply, if we believe in decency, derech eretz, empathy, respect, humility, kavod habrios etc. than taking public positions that fly in the face of those most essential of values seems to me to be a desecration of the HKB'H's Torah that promotes those values.

The hope is that leadership, be it in communities, shuls, schools and in the government continues to attract and inspire the best and the brightest. While great men and women such as Moshe Rabbeinu, Dvorah HaNeviah, Dovid HaMelech and Yoshiyahu HaMelech all approached leadership with a certain healthy ambivalence, eventually they heard the call to service and brought both their great strength and their great decency to bear in the service of Am Yisroel.

Let us hope that that is a model that we continue to see and support for the betterment of our people and of humankind.