

Behaalotecha 2015

Delivered by Rabbi Krupnick 6/6/15

This week's Torah portion gives us a powerful lesson in leadership, but it comes when the leader of the Jewish People is at his lowest ebb. You think you've had some bad days? Listen to what Moshe has to say to Gd in his despair: "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? . . . I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me-if I have found favor in your eyes-and do not let me face my own ruin." (Numbers 11: 11-15) He's having a bad day...

Clearly the man is overwhelmed. And I guess at one time or another many of us have felt the same way. So Moses does what any one of us would have told him to do: Delegate. You don't have to carry the burden alone, get some other leaders who can help you. And that's exactly what he does. Later on in the portion he picks 70 elders with whom he can share leadership responsibilities, and it goes rather well. As the Torah says, "The spirit that was in him (Moses) and put it upon the 70 elders." Great. Now he has a system in place to address problems as they arise. Now when someone needs answers there isn't just one person they can turn to, but 70 people of authority who can help to solve their problems. And from this we learn two important lessons: #1 - You can't solve all your problems yourself, so get other people to help you and #2- Know who to ask for solutions to your problems.

But there is more... What gets Moshe so angry, so frustrated, is not just that the People complain, and not just that he has to shoulder the burden. What bothers him the most is that the people are not able to solve these, or pretty much any, problems on their own. They are infantile and they are helpless. They simply still have too much Egypt still left in them, and as a result, they are not going to make it to the Promised Land. So, even though they now have more people to turn to the fact of the matter is that they are helpless when it comes to meeting the challenges of their own lives.

We all, of course, live with our own challenges and the way we deal with them says a lot about who we are on the inside. But not all challenges are the same... For instance, academics who study leadership distinguish between "technical" challenges and "adaptive" challenges. What's the difference? A technical challenge is one where you've got a problem and someone else has the answer for you. You are ill so you go to the doctor, she diagnoses your condition and prescribes medication. All you have to do is follow the instructions. Tough Problem-Straightforward Solution. We know how that works in Torah: The Jewish People are slaves? Gd sends some plagues and they are free to go. The Jewish People are hungry? Gd sends them manna and they can eat all they want. Know the right person to ask and you'll get the answer you need to your Technical Challenge.

Adaptive challenges are different. They arise when we, ourselves are part of the problem and need to be part of finding the solution. You are now well so you go to the doctor, and he says to you, "I can give you something to take, but until you make some lifestyle changes you're never going to be well. You need to exercise more, to eat right, to get more rest..." Adaptive leadership

is what is called for when the world is changing; circumstances are no longer what they were, and what once worked works no more. There is no quick fix, no pill, no simple following of instruction; no simple solution that comes from someone else. We have to change. The leader cannot do it for us.

And that's what gets Moshe so freaked out. The 70 help, for sure, but until the People realize that they have the potential to solve their own problems, they can't have a long term future, which turns out to be exactly the case. They can't, and they won't and they don't.

Leadership is easy when individuals or organizations are faced with problems for which they already know the solutions. Leadership is easy when there is a simple solution that someone else can give you. And every day each of us is faced with problems and challenges for which there are technical solutions. Either we have a formula for solving the problem, or we know who to ask. But it is in addressing adaptive challenges that real growth takes place.

But interestingly, unlike with technical challenges, there is no one right way of meeting adaptive challenges. Every person has his or her own strengths, their own perspective, their own experience to draw on. So while appointing the 70 was a good short term solution, it paled in comparison to empowering the People to think for themselves; to be able to adapt to new challenges as they arose.

And in this we find a powerful lesson for our times and our lives as well. We rely on so many professionals to help us with our problems. And there is nothing wrong with that. But the best of therapists will tell you that only you can really address your own problems. Only you can change you. And that is where faith comes in: We all have a far greater capacity for problem solving on our own than we usually give ourselves credit for. We have untapped reservoirs of talent and energy and creativity and hope. Faith is not believing that Gd will solve all your problems. Faith is believing that Gd has given you what it takes to adapt to new challenges and to find success in unsuspected ways.