

Behaalotecha 2016 – Sharing What You Know is How You Grow
Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick June 25, 2016

In the summer of 2010, a young soldier got his hands on a vast amount of classified military information for the Pentagon and shared with the press. There was a huge outcry from the military, of course, for whom secrecy has always been paramount. The head of Special Forces in Afghanistan at the time, General Stanley Mc Crystal was horrified. But his response was far from what you might expect. I was listening to a talk General Mc Crystal gave recently and I want to share with you what he said he learned from this incident.

Secrecy, he said, was in the DNA of American security forces. Standard operation procedure was to keep information in silos within the individual organizations. The reasoning had always been only those who need to know should have access to the information that leadership had learned. But in the wake of that massive leak, General Mc Crystal began to rethink the basic premise behind military information. The problem was that neither he, nor any strategist, could fully predict who needed the information and who could use it most effectively. And so instead of making it harder to get important field information, he declassified it so that those who needed it the most could have access to it. He began to break down the silos and move from a culture of secrecy to a culture of sharing information. As he said, “We passed information around and suddenly we found that information is only of value if you give it to people who have the ability to do something with it. The fact that I know something has zero value if I’m not the person who can actually make something better because of it. So, as a consequence, what we did was changed the idea of information; instead of knowledge is power, to me where sharing is power.”

And I share this as background for understanding a pivotal scene in this week’s Torah portion; a powerful lesson in leadership that we can all learn from. In chapter 11 of the Book of Numbers we find Moshe at the end of his rope. The People are complaining for lack of food and Moshe does not know what to do. So Gd tells him to appoint 70 elders to share the leadership burden. Gd says to Moshe, “I will draw upon the spirit that is in you and put it upon them, and they shall share the burden of the people with you.” Great. Now Moses will be able to share his hard-won insight with them and he will have help. But the story continues....

Two of the elders who did not accompany the rest of the 70 began to prophesize on their own. They seem to have gone rogue, as it were. And Joshua, Moshe’s top lieutenant, runs up to Moshe to turn them in. “My lord Moses, restrain them!” he implores. But Moshe surprises Joshua when he says, “Are you angry on my account? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets that the Lord put his spirit upon them.” In other words, don’t worry that too many people have access to too much information. Would that everyone who needed this special spirit, and could use it to help others, had access to it. Instead of hoarding power, let’s share it.

This is a fantastic lesson in leadership. Moshe is willing to share with others the insight and information he has gained through trial and error with the others. He learns that by empowering others he is moving the mission forward by sharing what he has had to learn the hard way. He is willing to give away in 5 minutes what it has taken him years to learn! His willingness to share has not only made it easier on himself, but more importantly made sure that the largest number of people could benefit by putting this new power into the hands of others.

I think that many of us are often put in a similar situation. You've worked hard, put in your time, and honed your craft, your expertise to a fine art. You are proud of what you have learned the hard way. You know what works and what doesn't because you've experienced both success and failure. And then a young colleague comes along, someone new to what you do. How do you handle it? For many, I suspect, there is an incredible, and sometimes irresistible temptation to hold on to the power we have and not give it freely to others. And we justify it by saying to ourselves, "I learned it the hard way, let them learn it too..." But what General Mc Crystal and Moshe Rabbenu are saying is quite different. There is a higher ideal. Sharing our knowledge and our experience with those less knowledgeable and less experienced not only makes their lives easier, it moves our shared concerns, our "mission" forward faster. And if the goal is really service of others; if our life mission is not to be self-centered, then finding ways to empower others with what we have learned is a win-win situation. It is a case where by giving away what you have everyone else, including you, actually has more.

Each of us has something we know, things we have learned through trial and error that can make another person's life easier. But it takes a certain amount of courage to be willing to share it. You have something special to share, something to give to another person that will shortcut their path to success. Don't be afraid to share it. Remember, the more you share of yourself, the more your soul grows inside of you, and isn't that the purpose of living a spiritual life – to grow in soul, in spirit, in character? Isn't that the truest measure of success in life?....