

Chukat 2017

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 7/1/17

I want to talk to you today about how Air-BnB helped me to gain a deeper understanding of one of the most profoundly puzzling sections of the Torah. The section in question is when Moshe hits the rock and forfeits the chance to make it into the Promised Land. I think that many of us would look at this passage and think that the punishment was grossly unfair and disproportionate to what Moshe actually did. I know there are many traditional explanations, but I want to come at this from a different angle - namely with the help of AirBnB.

The wording as to exactly why Moshe is being punished is the key here: Gd says in Numbers 2:12: "***Low Heh-Eh-Mon-Tem Bee L'Hok-Dee-Shay-nee L'Ay-nay B'nai Yisrael***" - As our translation says, "**Because you did not TRUST in me enough to affirm my sanctity in the sight of the Israelite People, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.**" To me, the pivotal word here is "Trust," and that's what I want to talk about...

We all know that trust is a fundamental building block of relationships and society. But,, when it comes to trust something profound is happening in our society. Interestingly, at the very time when people are trusting institutions like government and banks less, trust in unknown individuals is rising dramatically. We have technology to thank for that. So let's take AirBnB. I am sure that large hotel chains are wondering out loud how AirBnb caught on. After all, AirBnb is based on the premise that you will trust a total stranger to come and stay in your home unsupervised. There is no front desk. There is no security. There is no one on site to see what your guests are doing. You trust that they will take good care of your home and all the things in it. And, surprisingly, most people do just that. In fact, AirBnB guests are likely more responsible when it comes to cleaning up after themselves than people are when they rent hotel rooms. AirBnB has taken trust to a whole new level. But why is that? Why is this sort of individual trust on the rise while institutional trust is on the decline?

The answer, I believe, is accountability. You see, when you rent from AirBnb you do so based on reviews. The people who rent then review their stay. Was it a clean place? Did it have all the amenities as promised? But, at the same time, the renters are being reviewed as well by the owners. Did this person take good care of your stuff? Did they pay on time etc...? This is not blind trust. It's trust based on transparency and accountability. And when that trust falters the relationship fails. A person with a low rating cannot rent as easily, and a home that fails to meet advertised standards wont' be rented often, if at all.

And the more I thought about the issues of trust, transparency and accountability, the more I understood why Moshe had to go. When Gd says, "You did not trust in me enough," He is saying that you, Moses are accountable to Me, and the People need to know that. If I want them to trust Me, says Gd, then they need to know that you are accountable for your actions just as much as they are. They did not trust in Me, and that's why they lost the chance to get into the Promised Land. (See the Torah portion from 2 weeks ago.) They need to know that the same rules of trust apply to you. They need to see that if you expect me to trust and take care of you, you need to trust in Me. And when that level of trust is gone, so is the ability to lead..."

So when Moshe's "Trust Score" goes down, which it did when he struck the rock in anger, the relationship falters, both between Moses and Gd, and between Moses and the people he is to lead. What the Torah has added is transparency. Had Moses been able to do whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, with no degree of accountability, simply because he was "buddies" with Gd, the system would have failed because accountability would have been a joke.

It seems to me that the keys to trusting relationships are accountability and transparency. For trust to be established a person needs to know that you are being straight and honest with them. But they also need to know that you do not see yourself above accountability. Small children may be the exception, but in any meaningful relationship, especially in the context of family, everyone needs to know that they are all equally accountable and that no one is above that. Otherwise, you'll be using the power of your position to put you above the level of accountability and that's when trust breaks down. Further, it seems to me that at a time when institutional trust is waning, interpersonal trust must continue to gain ground, for the good of us all. We need to think through what makes for trusting relationships; we need to assess how to make them stronger. We need to feel accountable to others and let them know that they in turn must be transparent and accountable to us as well. No one can see themselves above it, unless the strength of relationship does not matter. Relationships thrive on trust. And so as we rise now in prayer think of how you can build more trusting relationships and how trust can be built from the bottom up. Think about what trust means to you; how you can strengthen it with others, and how that level of trust will likely be returned to you in kind.