

Lech Lecha 2014

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick, November 1, 2014

This week, in my sermon series, I am talking about the "Gift of a Gentle Spirit." And really what moved me to address this topic was one phrase that I keep hearing over and over again. You know, on average, I officiate at about 75 or so funerals a year. That means I spend lots of time with families hearing them talk about loved ones who have passed. And among the highest compliments that a family can pay about a father or brother is to call him a "Gentleman." It's a wonderful compliment: He's a real "Gentleman." (And while there is no exact equivalent for women - calling someone a "Lady" is close but not exact - the same character traits I'm thinking of are high praise for women as well.)

But what does it mean to be "gentle"? In the hard driving world we live in, gentle is often mistaken for weak or soft, but those are certainly not compliments. But gentleness does not denote timidity, fear or weakness. Gentle in Hebrew is "Adin" - which is like the Hebrew word "Adayin" - which means "not yet." What's the connection? I think that "not yet" or "still" and connotes holding back, and therefore gentleness is a kind of "self-restraint." It's not that a person does not have the strength or courage to act, but rather that he has his strength under control for a higher purpose, for a higher set of values or ideals that governs his behavior. He could react one way - and people would understand if he did, but it's not going to happen, because the gentleman has both strength and control.

Gentleness means that a person does not over-react, that he or she does not live a life governed by emotions. These people have a higher ideal that governs their response to a given situation. That is apparent in today's Torah portion. Avram's strength and will and emotions are tested when Lot is taken captive. Avram goes to war. It is our chance to see him as a warrior. What kind of a soldier, what kind of a warrior will he be? But it's not just us, the readers, who wonder. The text says the men he gathered to fight with him are wondering that, too. In chapter 14 which we read today it says, "When Avram heard that his kinsman was taken captive, he mustered his "Chaneechav", born into his household, numbering 318 and went in pursuit as far as Dan." And this word "Chaneechav" is an interesting one. It does not simply mean "men" and it clearly does not mean "soldiers." Our text translates it as "retainers", but I like Rashi's translation best. Rashi says "Chaneechav" means Avram's "initiates." It's from the word "Chinuch" which means "education." Rashi says they are being initiated into the mitzvot, into the commandments. In other words they are being trained in the way of Avram and his Gd. And so they are learning by watching him what it means to be a soldier, to be a man, and to be a Jew.

It is important to note that our Torah goes to great lengths to show that Avram does not go on a rampage. He could have been a barbarian and we would have said, "Well that's the way wars are fought... or at least they were in ancient times. To the victor go the spoils..." But he is careful to keep the captives alive and to not plunder their possessions. He makes it clear that he is not in it for the loot. He shows great self-restraint, even though he could have shown retribution. Why did he make such a public display of being fair, of not being in it for the slightest personal gain? Why does he say, "I won't take so much as shoe lace?" Because he knows his initiates are watching him and learning from his actions. That's why they are called his "Chaneechav" - they are the ones who are learning "Cheenuch" from him. In fact, in Camp Ramah, campers are called

"Chaneechim," initiates who learn by watching their counselors and other adults who are their role models. They learn by watching.

So what do Avram's men learn by watching? They see the strength that comes from self-restraint, and that is what I call the "gift of a gentle spirit." What this passage suggests to me is that others learn from watching us, and they take their emotional cues from us. The Torah knows this, but so does science. In science there is something called "mirror neurons" that are in our brains. They mirror the emotions and the spirit of the people around us. When people are uptight and anxious around us, we tend to get that way, too. When people are angry and loud, we tend to mirror that as well. When people are upset or sad, our mirror neurons latch on to that. Likewise when a person is energetic, optimistic, and up-beat we tend to mirror those emotions as well. Therefore, in times of conflict (and we all have them) we need to remember that by bringing a more gentle spirit into the equation, by slowing down the reaction time, the anger and the anxiety, we can help shape the emotional state of the people around us. We can actually give the "gift of a gentle spirit" by living it ourselves, even when circumstance could warrant a stronger, more visceral reaction. We need to remember that our emotions shape the world around us. And one of the ways we do this is by understanding this word, "Chaneechav" - initiate. The word "Chinuch" implies a process, a process of growth and development that is going on all around us, all the time. We need to remember that we are all works in progress and all learning all the time, and that showing that kind of self-restraint and quiet strength brings out the best in us and the best in others as well....