

Pekuday 2014

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick, March 1, 2014

Judaism is, as you know, a communal religion; it is best practiced in the context of community. We are not monastic; that's why we need a minyan for a complete service, and especially to say Kaddish. No one should be alone when he or she is carrying the burden of loss. That's why we build synagogues. It's a place where we can come together in community and feel closer to Gd while we come closer to one another. Synagogues are important; they are the bedrock of Jewish life, and they always have been.

This week we finish the Book of Exodus, which ends with the construction of the Mishkan, the world's first synagogue. And it's a big deal – it's the dwelling place for Gd's presence here on earth, a place to feel closer. It's been a lot of work for the People, and now the building is done. They are ready for the ribbon cutting. And so you'd expect some grand and eloquent speech from Moses at this ribbon cutting, but all the Torah says is, “When Moses saw all the tasks that the People had done – just as the Lord had commanded – Moses blessed them.” That's it. He blessed them. It doesn't tell us what he said, so the Midrash fills that in. We are taught, “He said, “May it be Gd's will that the Shechinah rests upon the work of your hands.” That's it. A 5 second sermon! It took five Torah portions to build it, and 5 seconds to bless it! All that work and Moses says next to nothing... But I think I know why...

This Shabbos we are continuing our sermon series on the Bible and Special Needs, and I think that the reason that Moses gives a 5 second blessing is because he had a disability. He couldn't speak like other people. And that makes me wonder: Why does the greatest hero of the Torah, of ALL of Judaism have special needs? What can WE learn from that? Maybe it was a stutter, maybe it was a harelip, we don't know, but one thing we can be certain of, he's super self-conscious about it. Remember when Gd calls to him at the Burning Bush and tells him he is destined to be a leader? The first thing that pops into his mind is his disability. As a shepherd he does not have to say anything to anyone, and he's just fine with that. But press him on the one thing that makes him different than anyone else and Moses gets defensive. More than defensive, he is anguished and in pain when he says, “My Lord, I've never been able to speak well, not yesterday, not the day before, and certainly not now since you've been talking to your servant. I have a slow mouth and a thick tongue.”

And when I read that I looked back and you know what – Moses really says very little in the entire Torah! When he sees the Egyptian task master beating the Jew, he strikes him down, but he says nothing. And when he tries to break up the two Jews fighting and they confront him, the Torah says he THOUGHT well, they found me out. He did not say anything in response to them. He just runs. The next scene finds him at a well... When Jacob meets Rachel at the well, there is along soliloquy. When Moses meets his beloved Tziporah, he says nothing. He is self-conscious, and he just feels different. In fact, when Moses forfeits the right to enter into the Promised Land it is precisely because he does

not speak to the rock, choosing to strike it instead. It is a lifelong challenge that he never really outgrows.

So when he's called to be the spokesman, to speak to Pharaoh in court, of course he says no! But Gd's response is surprising: "Who is it that gives a person a mouth? Who determines whether one person speaks and another doesn't? Why is it that one person hears and another doesn't? And why can one person see and another doesn't? Isn't it because of Me, the Eternal? You know it is. Go now, and I will be there to give you the words to speak; I will tell you what to say." Moses still says no and Gd, the Torah tells us, gets angry with him. They are clearly frustrated with one another.

But Gd is saying that He chose Moses knowing full well that he had special needs, and He chose him to be the spokesperson for the Jewish People! And in a perfect world, Moses would have said, thank you. Thank you for making me who I am and for believing in me. But it's not so simple. Moses can't entirely transcend the pain he feels inside, the inadequacy, and so he resists. So then Gd has to make a decision, a decision that I am sure many parents with children who have special needs have to make: Does he push him to try to make it on his own, or does He give him help? And really, Gd does both. He gives him another pep talk AND Gd appoints Aaron to speak for Moses.

Gd is saying, "I refuse to focus only on your challenges. I see the bigger picture. I see who you can become even if you yourself might not." And so Gd equips Moses with more tools for success. He gives him confidence and he gives him a helper. That's a model that we follow to this very day... I think of the special needs programs here in our shul like Project Lev which gives kids Jewish education, and Teen Lev which gives vocational training, and Soups and Sweets where adults can learn how to cook and bake and at the same time feel good about themselves. We try to follow the Torah's model and focus on the abilities, and it is all done in the context of community. We should never be alone. We all need someone to believe in us, that's what Gd does for Moshe and what we do for those who need what we have to offer.

And maybe the reason that Gd chooses someone with challenges, someone who isn't cookie cutter like everyone else, is to show Gd's love and care for each individual, even when they – even when WE feel weak, or defensive, or helpless.... Maybe faith and community give us tools for success that we could not find on our own. Special needs really do make us look closer – at the lives of each individual and at our own. We were all created to be better, stronger and more independent – and we need each other to help us get there.