

Shmot 2016

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 1/2/16

This is the time of the year, of course, that many people make New Year's resolutions. And as I asked around, there's one general theme that I have found most resolutions have in common: "This year I want to take greater ownership of my life." Whether it is diet or exercise, or travel, we want to do what WE know we need to do, but for some reason haven't. So I ask you: "What's been holding you back?" And quite often, the answer is the expectations of others. We'd like greater freedom but we are accountable to others. Family members, our employers, our employees, they all impinge on our time, and even when they are not making demands of us, we hear a voice in our heads telling us we need to meet the expectations of others first, and then take care of ourselves. But often what ends up happening is accountability becomes blame. But we need to stop blaming others for the course our lives are taking! I believe that when we take greater ownership of our own lives, when we stop blaming others for the course our life is taking, we all will feel more empowered, more alive and more in control of our own destinies. And you just know that few things in life feel better than being empowered to live the kind of lives we really want to.

And yet, the reason we need to make these kinds of resolutions in the first place is because, inevitably, something is holding us back. Often what holds us back is something, or someone, telling us that we can't live the kind of life we really want; that we can't do the things we really want to do.

There is a powerful and potent example of this in the Torah portion we read this morning. Moses, as you remember, is brought up in the palace. He lives a charmed life until he comes to understand the suffering of his Jewish brothers and sisters. And so he tries to do something about it. But that confrontation not only makes him run away, but keeps him from wanting to ever go back. Still, Gd wants him back. Gd is calling on him to make a difference, and Gd assures Moses that he can do this - that Gd Himself will be with him, He'll protect him, and He will make him successful. All Moshe has to do is trust Gd and his own talents.

And yet, at the famous burning bush, Moses rejects Gd four times! Four times he tells Gd to choose someone else. In his second refusal what Moses flat out says, "The people will not listen to me." But how does he know that? He hasn't even tried! How could he possibly know that no one will listen to him? Gd says He'll force Pharaoh's hand and Pharaoh will definitely have to let the Jewish People go, but Moses says, "There is no way they will listen to me." Why?

Well, quite frankly, I don't think it has much if anything to do with his speech impediment. First of all he has Aaron. But really, if Moshe asked, couldn't Gd just cure the speech impediment? No, it seems to me that it is something much deeper than Moshe simply worrying about what his voice sounds like.

Twenty-five years ago, when I was just starting out in my first pulpit, I served in a shul that had no Hazzan, so I led all the davening. But when it came to the High Holidays we brought in a Hazzan just for those services. Well, that Hazzan started, as ours does, at the Torah service. The Rabbi always did Shacharit. So I naturally assumed that it was my responsibility. But one night in the late spring of my first year we had a Board Meeting and the topic of who would lead

Shacharit on the High Holidays came up. One older members of the Board, who had been part of the shul for a long, long time said, "Rabbi, I've heard you sing, and I think we'd better leave that up to someone else." Well, needless to say, I did not lead Shacharit that year, or EVER on the High Holidays, to this day! And for years - years, I was self-conscious about leading any services. For years, every time I opened my mouth to sing I thought of that woman.

Well, I think that that is what's going on with Moshe in this scene. He's got in the back of him mind his one and only encounter with two Jews. He remembers, like it as yesterday, the time he broke up that fight between the two Jewish guys in Egypt and they said to him: ME SAAM-CHA L'ISH-SAAR V'SHOFET ALEYNU? "Who made you chief and ruler over us?" And that was all it took for Moses to back away from his destiny. One simple sentence that shaped his self-concept and robbed him of the power to take charge of his own life. And I could just imagine this phrase playing over in his mind again and again. So when Gd asks him to lead, he just echoes what he's been saying to himself all along.

But I also remember the first time I had the temerity to mention to one of my Rebbes that I wanted to be a Rabbi. As many of you know, I've wanted to be a Rabbi since I was five years old, but it was only as a teenager that I told anyone of authority of my dreams. I floated the idea with a teacher of mine, a career Jewish educator, and he said to me, "Aaron, I think you'd make a great Rabbi." And that, too was a tape I played again and again in my head. In fact, I kept reminding myself of what he said even as I walked into my Rabbinical School interview.

And so, on this first Shabbos of the New Year, I ask all of you, "What line of negativity plays over in your mind, in your heart?" What is it that someone once said about you that stuck in you and made you stuck? And conversely - is there something someone you know is longing to hear from you? I have found that the way of to overcome the negative voices in our own heads is to share words of encouragement with others. We counteract the negative impulse in our own heads and hearts by bringing a positive, "can-do" attitude into the lives of others. It is a gift we give others, and to ourselves. Ironically, we take greater control of our own lives when we encourage others to do the same in theirs. And that's a resolution worth making - and keeping in the New Year....