

Answering the Call, In Life and Leadership¹

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Answering the Call

“Everyone who wills can hear the inner voice. It is within everyone.” Mahatma Gandhi, the great and famous champion of civil rights, uttered these insightful words in the 20th century; and yet, many centuries before his time, our Sages of blessed memory conveyed a remarkably similar concept.

In *Parshat Lech Lecha*, Hashem calls on Avraham (known as Avram at that time):

And Hashem said to Avram: Go yourself from you land, from your hometown, from the house of your father to the land that I will show you.

Bereishit 12:1

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-אַבְרָם, לֵךְ-לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ
וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ, אֶל-הָאֶרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר
אֲרָאָה.
בְּרֵאשִׁית יב:א

An important question arises: Why did Hashem aim this divine directive at Avraham in particular? On what ground did Hashem select Avraham? What of the others who populated that pre-monotheistic universe? Surely anyone who was spoken to by the Almighty Himself would speedily come to their wits and uproot themselves to whichever far-flung realm that Awesome Voice might compel them.

The *Chiddushei Harim*² supplies an answer to this quandary which is as beautiful as it is brilliant, encompassing within it the great challenge of modern-man in an increasingly frenzied society: The call of the Almighty went forth for all to hear; only Avraham, however, made the choice to answer that call.

In that same vein, Chazal, our Sages, note (for example, *Pirkei Avot* 6:2) that a *bat kol*, or a Heavenly voice, calls out from Mount Sinai each day, unbeknownst to the Children of Israel. The question and the challenge, then, is to discover our calling; to understand our challenge; to tease out that soft, subtle and sometimes soundless voice that beckons us to rise to our potential, and to magnify it into a resounding declaration that both guides and colors our lives.

¹ I am deeply indebted to Noah Jacobson for his tireless efforts and without whom writing this article would not have been possible.

² See *Sfat Emet, Lech Lecha* S632 and S662 based on *Bereishit Rabbah* 39:1.

Beginning with a Question

How can we tease out that voice from the cacophonous constellation of sounds that seem to totally inundate our environment? To be sure, amid the clutter of earthly diversions lies our personal mission and purpose. “G-d hides things,” goes the old adage, “by putting them all around us.” But how do we initiate the formidable and often overwhelming process of sifting through those innumerable “things”?

The answer: simply by *asking*. Through the holiday of Passover and its central seder procedure, Jews learn well the criticality of asking important and incisive questions, so much so that the actual answers to those questions seem to assume an almost secondary importance. The very process of asking itself invariably leads to greater learning and understanding. If the seder on Passover serves as the paradigm of our educational philosophy, then an extensive line of questioning certainly stands at square one of the educational process.

What are the Questions? Life and Leadership

Which questions will lead to this discovery and truly set off the process of self-education in earnest? American author Richard Bach in his book *Illusions* wrote: “The simplest questions are the most profound. Where were you born? Where is your home? Where are you going? What are you doing? Think about these once in a while and watch your answers change.” Bach’s assertion may seem at first elementary, perhaps even offensive to the supposedly sophisticated sensibilities of some. But we must ask ourselves: How often do we take pause in pondering the most rudimentary and essential components of our earthly, humanly existence?

Though I personally dedicate much of my time helping others navigate these sorts of questions in discerning their own direction in life, I want to focus this essay specifically on the underpinnings of effective and inspired leadership. What questions must leaders ask to propel themselves to effective leadership?

In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins suggests that one’s “Hedgehog Principle”—or particularized, idiosyncratic sweet-spot—resides at the focal intersection of three main components: passion, skills, and value-added capability. In other words: What am I deeply passionate about? What am I naturally good at? What does the world at large, or at least my own world in particular, need from me?

Moshe, a Familiar Paradigm

For a biblical manifestation of this Hedgehog Principle at work within the subject of leadership, one needn’t look further than our cherished leader Moshe. Moshe serves as the paradigmatic leader of Jewish history, a *manhig* (leader) par excellence. I believe that three episodes, each occurring and adjacent to one another within the span of a few verses in chapter two of Exodus, demonstrate Moshe’s own challenge in “answering the call,” and his endeavor to learn about himself in the process. What type of person is Moshe? What type of leader? And how did Moshe succeed in securing his status—a status he certainly never sought out—as the greatest leader in the history of mankind: “There was never another prophet in Israel like Moshe” (Devarim 34:10).

Round 1: Egyptian v. Jew: Passion and Skills

The first of three episodes depicts Moshe's decision to confront a violent Egyptian taskmaster seen striking a Jewish man:

And it came to pass in those days, when Moshe was grown up, that he went out unto his brethren, and looked on their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, one of his brethren. And he looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man, he smote the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand.

Shemot 2:11-12

וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָהֵם, וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא
אֶל-אֶחָיו, וַיֵּרָא, בְּסִבְלָתָם; וַיֵּרָא
אִישׁ מִצְרִי, מַכֶּה אִישׁ-עִבְרִי מֵאֶחָיו.
וַיִּפֶן כֹּה וְכֹה, וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ; וַיִּד,
אֶת-הַמִּצְרִי, וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ, בַּחֹל.
שְׁמוֹת ב:י"א-י"ב

At first glance, this initial episode might leave the reader with a less than impeccable opinion of Moshe. Moshe seems to act as a vengeful vigilante poised to take the law into his own hands in a violent manner. What gave Moshe the right to act in such a manner and to render such a decision? Certainly, his response could not qualify as *middah kenegged middah* (measure for measure), for the taskmaster himself beat the Jewish servant, while Moshe killed the taskmaster in retribution.³

The various commentaries on these verses, however, take up this point of the hastiness of Moshe's response and seek to validate his decision. Rashi clarifies that Moshe procured the credential of a leader among the Egyptians, and even achieved great stature, and therefore reserved the right to punish that particular taskmaster had he erred. In other words, the Egyptian government, as it were, conferred upon Moshe the legal privilege of meting out justice, and therefore his action was justified and appropriate.⁴

More important for this particular conversation of the Hedgehog Principle and leadership, Rashi contends that Moshe did not merely act on a whim, but made a concrete decision to empathize with and defend his brothers in the field. Moshe, in fact, did indeed act in a thought-out manner. He summoned the instinctual emotion and passion that coursed intensely through his veins, and channeled them into a calculated, careful and effectual response.

Moreover, Moshe understood the power and urgency of that particular moment. The commentator R. Ya'akov Mecklenburg, author of *haKetav ve'ha-Kabbalah*, suggests that Moshe wanted someone else to save the Hebrew but "he looked and there was no person," no savior but himself. In addition to the morality of the action that that particular moment called for, Moshe realized that only he—in his own unique way and owing to his own unique position—could truly and satisfactorily answer that call. Moshe knew that he must step forward and lead the Children of Israel. He endeavored to take on the presumptions of an entire legal system, a system that perpetuated injustice and which tormented Jewish slaves on a daily basis. Moshe dramatically demonstrates that leaders must not only have passion and the smarts to channel that passion, but they must also recognize and utilize the power of a particular moment to propel their own actions.

³ R. Yosef Kapach, in his footnotes to the *Torat Chaim Chumash* to Shemot 2:12 infers that R. Saadiah Gaon maintains that Moshe, in actuality, did not have intent to kill when he smote the Egyptian.

⁴ See also *Chizkuni* who writes that Moshe actually investigated and found out that this Egyptian had violated other crimes worthy of capital punishment.

Round 2: Jew v. Jew: “Rebel Without a Cause”

In the next episode, however, Moshe realizes that despite a healthy dose of passion, good tact, and a *carpe diem* (“seize the day!”) philosophy, a leader must ultimately have one thing before all else: willing followers.

And he went out the second day, and, behold, two men of the Hebrews were striving together; and he said to him that did the wrong: “Why are you smiting your fellow?” And he said: “Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you plan to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian?” And Moshe feared, and said: “Surely the thing is known.”

Shemot 2:13-14

וַיֵּצֵא בַיּוֹם הַשֵּׁנִי, וַהֲגִיחַ שְׁנֵי-אֲנָשִׁים
עֹבְרִים נֹצִים; וַיֹּאמֶר, לְרֹשֶׁעַ, לָמָּה
תִּכֹּה, רֵעֶךָ. וַיֹּאמֶר מִי שְׂמֹךְ לְאִישׁ שׁוֹר
וְשֹׁפֵט, עָלֶינוּ--הֲלֹהֵרִגְנִי אַתָּה אֹמֵר,
כִּאֲשֶׁר הִרְגַתְּ אֶת-הַמִּצְרִי; וַיִּירָא מֹשֶׁה
וַיֹּאמֶר, אֲכֵן נֹדַע הַדָּבָר.
שְׁמוֹת ב:יג-יד

Moshe’s new encounter with Jewish infighting seems to overturn several of his own assumptions, namely that the Jews themselves prefer him as their leader. The seeds of the Jewish people’s timeless reputation as a “stiff-necked” people, and more particularly, as a nation that swallows its own leaders, seem to take root in this very episode.

Rashi explains that these two quarrelling Jews were, in fact, Datan and Aviram, infamous troublemakers who continued to wreak havoc for Moshe in the desert. But Datan and Aviram merely stand as forerunners of a larger contingency of Jews who will continue to reject and resist Moshe’s leadership at every step along their national sojourn. At this critical juncture, Moshe learns another critical lesson in leadership, one that any passionate and restless young visionary might identify with today: he must contend with the obstacles to forward motion established by those who cannot share his vision. One can imagine the frustration, as Moshe feels his unbridled energy and passion slowly dissipate, becoming suddenly a leader without a nation; a visionary without an enterprise; a “rebel without a cause.”

Round 3: Daughters v. Shepherd: The Capacity to Add Value

Sensing the peril in remaining in Egypt, Moshe escapes:

When Pharaoh heard about the incident, he sought to kill Moshe, but Moshe fled from the face of Pharaoh, and dwelt in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well. Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters; and they came and drew water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. And the shepherds came and drove them away; but Moshe stood up and helped them, and watered their flock.

Shemot 2:15-17

וַיִּשְׁמַע פַּרְעֹה אֶת-הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה וַיִּבְקֹשׁ לְהַרְגוֹ
אֶת-מֹשֶׁה וַיִּבְרַח מִפְּנֵי פַרְעֹה וַיָּשָׁב
בְּאֶרֶץ-מִדְיָן וַיֹּשֶׁב עַל-הַבְּאֵר. וּלְכַהֵן מִדְיָן
שִׁבְעַת בָּנוֹת וַתִּבְאֵנָה וַתִּדְלְגָה וַתִּמְלְאֵנָה
אֶת-הַרְהֻטִים לְהַשְׁקוֹת צֹאן אֲבֵיהֶן. וַיָּבֹאוּ
הַרְעִים וַיִּגְרְשׁוּם וַיִּקָּם מֹשֶׁה וַיּוֹשֶׁעַן וַיִּשְׁקוּ
אֶת-צֹאֲנֵם.
שְׁמוֹת ב:טו-יז

Unlike the Jews in Egypt, the daughters seem eager to accept Moshe’s assistance, and appreciative of his initiative. In that context, with a willing followership, Moshe is able to thrive as a leader and rise to the occasion. Sforno expounds on the words “but Moshe stood up and helped them”:

He did not try to reprove them, but simply rose to save the oppressed from their oppressors.

Sforno, Shemot 2:17

לא הקפיד לישר ארחותם בתוכחות מוסר, רק
קם להושיע את העשוקים מיד עושקיהם.
ספורנו, שמות ב:יז

Moshe was able to act swiftly and effectively, and to actualize his passion for compassion and moral-social justice. In short, Moshe learns how to succeed in these combative situations. He uses force when necessary, but also knows that he can thrive only in situations where his help fills a need that is desired by his constituency.

Nuance and Balance: A Leader in His Element

Perhaps the most critical theme that emerges from Moshe's narrative, in terms of effective leadership, is the necessity of nuance and complexity for successful leadership. Put differently, a leader must refine his or her ability to "wear many hats," and wear them well, and in different situations. A leader must take into account a multitude of considerations and seemingly conflicting emotions in order to arrive at the optimal course of action.

Moshe himself seems to pass this lesson on to his own successor. In *Parshat Pinchas*, as Hashem instructs Moshe that he tragically will not merit to enter the Land of Israel, the Jewish people must accept new leadership. Who will Moshe choose?

Moshe's eventual heir to the leadership of the Jewish people, Yehoshua, successfully strikes a delicate and diplomatic balance. On the one hand, Yehoshua's military prowess and aggression solidify his status as a commanding force to be reckoned with. And yet, the Torah (Shemot 33:11) describes Yehoshua as "*lo yamish mitoch ha'ohel*," a learned type who prefers to confine himself in solitude and in scholarship.

In other words, Yehoshua finds his element in equilibrium. Like Moshe, he both listens to and draws on his passions when necessary and in order to fuel his actions, and yet constantly maintains his sensitivity to the context at hand: context of who he is, context of Who he serves, context of what a particular situation calls for—Yehoshua, in other words, "answers the call" with flying colors.

Autobiographical Leadership

Will we answer the call? Will we listen to the inner voice, which beckons us to seize our opportunities and realize our leadership potential? In a well-known *Harvard Business Review* article by Harris Collingwood, recently cited by Jewish leadership expert Erica Brown,⁵ Collingwood asserts that, "Leadership is autobiographical. If I don't know your life story, I don't know a thing about you as a leader." One might add that if you yourself have never pondered the plot of your own life, have never bothered to navigate your own narrative of human existence, you cannot possibly realize your own potential to lead. Moshe taught this; Yehoshua taught this; now, in a confused world in desperate need of direction and strong, inspired leadership, we must faithfully follow in their lofty footsteps.

⁵ Erica Brown, "Making Inspired Leaders: New Approaches to Leadership Development," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 81 (2005).