

Beshalach: Outsourcing Kindness

Moshe Taragin

As the nation hastily quits Egypt, Moshe has other concerns on his plate. On this epic day of freedom Moshe is preoccupied with the bones of an ancient "grandfather", whom he never met. Two hundred years earlier, upon his death, Yosef had pleaded that his body be reinterred in Israel and, of all people, Moshe felt duty-bound to satisfy this request. On that momentous day, millions of people were busily scurrying around Egypt, preparing for their desert journey, but Moshe remained focused on a person he had never met, who wasn't even part of his direct lineage. This profile of Moshe's integrity and dutifulness is a fitting introduction to his career as a leader. An old adage asserts: if you want something done, ask a busy person. Moshe personifies this truth.

This portrait of Moshe, bursting with excitement and energy, is very different from his portrayal toward the end of the parsha. As the battle with Amalek rages in the valley below, a wearied Moshe struggles to keep his exhausted hands extended in prayer. His fatigued hands are being supported by brother and his nephew. What has changed? What happened to his boundless energy? Why has Moshe become so weary?

Some of this transformation has little to do with Moshe. At the outset of the journey from Egypt, Moshe was filled with rosy optimism about the future for his newly liberated nation. Watching the people traverse the sea, he joined them in celebration and in song to G-d.

Sadly, after this highlight, the national mood begins to deteriorate. Severe desert conditions loom as the harsh reality of the wilderness sets in. Complaints, unrest and accusations swirl, as the nation struggles to find their balance and their faith. Four times they protest the lack of provisions, ridiculously longing for the "lavish" banquets they enjoyed in Egypt. Their ludicrous nostalgia, petty bickering and cowardly lack of faith all deflate Moshe's enthusiasm, jading his optimism. Dashed expectations always weary our spirit.

Beyond dashed expectations, Moshe is less energetic because he is not as personally involved in the Aalek war as he was in the hauling of Yosef's coffin. He could have easily delegated the burdensome commission of Yosef's bones to a

descendant of Yosef or to someone less busy than himself. He had much on his mind, as he was spearheading a national evacuation and commencing a desert voyage. Yet, despite his frenetic schedule, Moshe does not get lost in the "swirl" of this major undertaking. He doesn't allow the larger mission to distract him from the individual needs of a deceased forefather.

Sometimes we get caught up in the energy and excitement of the moment and we ignore individuals. We get swept up by the euphoria of crowds or the excitement of large-scale agendas, and we neglect individual human beings standing right alongside of us, who could benefit from some personal attention. Observing my Rebbe, HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein, at weddings, was an amazing and formative privilege for me. Even at an advanced age, he would dance with tremendous fervor and passion. He would dance until the final "bell" maximizing the joy of the chatan. During intermission, when he wasn't dancing, he would lengthily chat with the elderly guests of the wedding. Often, elderly people get "lost" in the frenetic pace of a wedding. Watching my Rebbe not getting swept up in the electricity of the wedding, but paying attention to individuals, lessoned me never to ignore private individuals, or never to be distracted by larger crowds. When I read about Moshe I think about my Rebbe.

Moshe's labor of love didn't conclude with his removing Yosef's coffin from an Egyptian crypt. Again, refusing to delegate, he kept the bones "on his person", personally managing their safety and transport. This personal overseeing is even more impressive given the fact that Moshe was often beckoned to the mishkan. It would be sensible to stow the coffin far away, lest he become impure through contact with a Yosef's dead body, thereby disqualifying himself from entering the mishkan. Despite the risk, Moshe remains personally involved in this extended project. Moshe refuses to outsource his act of kindness.

Acts of kindness and compassion fill us with vision and energy. The easiest way to break an emotional rut is to perform a personal act of kindness or charity. It imbues us with meaning, nobility and selflessness. Moshe is no different, and as they depart Egypt, he is empowered by this quiet and unadorned act of kindness.

By contrast, toward the end of the parsha, Moshe has become a delegator, dispatching Yehoshua to conduct war, while he ascends a mountain to pray. This division of labor is absolutely necessary. Unlike the supernatural war at the sea,

the Amalek war-which is a battle for the divine presence in a world of evil- must be waged by humans. An 80-year old Moshe can hardly lead the charge. Moshe is an operator of miracles not a military strategist. That function falls to his disciple, Yehoshua. Through no fault of his own, Moshe has become a supervisor.

When directly engaged in charity Moshe possesses unbounded energy. When he becomes severed from direct engagement, his hands become weary. Such is the nature of personal acts of kindness. They energize us and ennoble us.

Our modern world has become massive and outsized. We live in ever larger settings- larger countries, larger cities and larger communities. Inevitably, we must create large-scale institutions and multi-million dollar organizations to administrate the distribution of welfare and of charity. The need for organizational philanthropy is even more true regarding the grand historical project of rebuilding and resettling our homeland of Israel.

However, large-scale or "organizational charity" cannot replace one-on-one individual acts of kindness. Philanthropy cannot replace compassion. Cutting a check in support of an organization cannot replace quiet and gentle kindness. Moshe administrates three and a half million people. Yet he isn't too busy to bestow kindness to Yosef.

The best portion of a good man's life is his little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love....William Wordsworth