

Yitro: Trust Me. Trust is a Good Thing.

Moshe Taragin

The crossing of the sea and the delivery of the Torah are each monumental events in Jewish history. As we crossed a swirling ocean Hashem's awesome power was on clear display. As we stood beneath a billowing mountain hearing the divine voice, Hashem's word was finally delivered to a human audience. Stylistically, it would make sense for these two stories to be read together, side-by side. Surprisingly they are not.

For some reason, the Torah inserts "intervening" stories, between these two great events. These seemingly trivial stories feel anticlimactic and they deflate the energy of the crossing of the sea. In these stories, we read about Moshe's ongoing efforts to feed a massive nation in a barren desert. We witness a heartwarming reunion between Moshe and his family, who have been ferried back by Moshe's father-in-law. Evidently, the outstanding events atop Sinai cannot proceed before these storylines about Moshe are detailed.

The religious traditions of Sinai are pivoted upon Moshe's credibility. This man, alone ascended heaven, and delivered the word of G-d to a human assembly stationed below. The foundations of our faith are premised upon the texts Moshe delivered and interpretations of that text which he performed. If his integrity is suspect the entire process will crash. For Har Sinai to commence, Moshe must first earn the trust of the people. Without this trust faith will not survive.

Each of these introductory stories, establish Moshe's credibility. By providing food and water to a starving nation, he earns their loyalty. Watching Moshe spearhead the victory against violent Amalek warriors, builds even more national trust. Subsequently, we observe Moshe's packed schedule: from early dawn to late at night he tirelessly mediates quarrels. When he isn't busy arbitrating disputes, he patiently counsels a young nation about life and the "ways of G-d."

Meeting Moshe's family lends him even greater credibility. Even the most charismatic leader is transparent to his own family. No man is a

hero to his children or to his spouse. Seeing Moshe as a father and a husband, and not just as a miracle maker, makes him more human and more believable. Moshe has now earned the trust of an entire people and, at this stage, Sinai can commence.

Trust is the cornerstone of faith and of religious tradition. Very little, if anything, about religious belief is scientifically verifiable. Faith is based upon our embracing truths delivered to us from previous generations, who themselves accepted these traditions from their ancestors. If we can't trust the source, the transmission will collapse. Thousands of years later we still trust the man who ascended a burning mountain and we live the faith he taught us. Likewise, we trust our parents and teachers who lovingly passed along these truths across the generations.

Trust is also vital for healthy relationships. Solid and lasting relationships are always built upon communication. Trust allows us to more honestly and openly communicate with each other. Additionally, successful relationships demand "conflict navigation" and forgiveness. It is easier to forgive those whose intentions we intuitively trust. Cultivating trusting and secure relationships is crucial for our emotional well-being.

Finally, successful communities cannot be constructed without unity of purpose and mutual trust. If we trust others to act morally we, ourselves are more likely to behave selflessly toward common good. While the legal system may protect against crime, it cannot fashion communities of compassion, collaboration and commitment. These must be built voluntarily based upon mutual trust. Law is "impositional", communities must be voluntary.

Recently, the Jewish world has been rocked by scandal, and is currently struggling through a crisis of trust. Terrible crimes of abuse have been perpetrated and thankfully, have been broadly and loudly condemned. These terrible crimes have raised greater awareness about the danger of sexual predation and other forms of exploitation. In response, communities, schools, and synagogues are crafting important guidelines to protect ourselves and our children from all forms of abuse. Included in these guidelines are warnings about the danger of naïve or unconditional trust- especially toward public figures. This is a crucial message, but one which we better get right. The terminology we employ and the tone of this conversation will impact our religious identity and

shape our communities. We must be precise and judicious about how we discuss "trust". We must be sensitive not to diminish the importance of living our life with trust. We are standing at a delicate precipice....

Human beings always self-inflict great harm when they overreact to threat or fear. Napoleon's ruthless and belligerent regime was an overreaction to the French revolution. The rise of Nazism was, in part an overreaction to the wounded German pride after the surrender of WWI. Markets overreact to negative financial reports, sending stocks into dizzying freefall. Overreaction often ruins relationships and reputations. We have learned the dangers of a cytokine storm, when the body's immune system overreacts to infection. Beware the perilous effects of disproportionate reactions, for they are often more hazardous than the initial threat.

In our attempts to caution against blind trust in leaders, we must not react disproportionately. The horrendous crimes must be loudly condemned and there must be zero tolerance for any abuse. Additionally, we must adopt aggressive guidelines to insure against further exploitation.

Here is where it gets tricky. Can we successfully caution against blind trust, while still upholding the overall value of trust in general? If our message isn't nuanced it will be distorted and misinterpreted as a denunciation of any form of trust. Will we all become distrustful people?

Sadly, we live in an age of distrust. Scandals always existed, but in the age of social media and public voyeurism we are exposed to them more frequently. We have witnessed a lineup of celebrities, politicians, and other public figures who have behaved dishonestly, committed grievous crimes and violated our public trust. If we further cultivate an attitude of distrust, it will weaken our ability to transmit our faith and its traditions. If we foster suspicion what will become of our personal relationships, which already bear the strain of internet addiction and the static of social media? How can we build cohesive and embracing communities if we fail to believe in each other? Worse, than any of these consequences is the potential fall into a life of cynicism. There is a thin line between caution and cynicism and we best not cross it. If, in our attempt to avoid the vulnerabilities of naiveté, we become cynical and pessimistic, we will have forfeited our better selves, thereby multiplying the "casualties" of

these crimes. Eric Hoffer, an American philosopher wrote "Someone who thinks the world is always cheating him is right. He is missing that wonderful feeling of trust in someone or something." Trust is a wonderful feeling and we better not lose it.

This is an opportunity to positively affirm the value of trust in our lives, while carefully discriminating between those who deserves our trust and those who does not. This is an opportunity to probe the limits of trust, even in honest people who we have faith in. This is the time for refined conversation not simplistic slogans. This is a time for trust, not for distrust.

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