



Shabbat Table Discussions

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TAKING INITIATIVE

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Dr. Jack McConnell was a retired physician who moved to Hilton Head, SC to spend his retirement years. He planned on spending his time playing golf, socializing with friends, and eating at restaurants, but after discovering that 1/3 of the local population didn't have access to adequate health care, he decided to start a local clinic. He spoke to some of his friends who were retired physicians and dentists and they agreed to pitch in. After much hard work, Dr. McConnell opened the clinic now known as Volunteers in Medicine. His project now has 96 clinics with thousands of volunteer physicians and other health professionals, offering free healthcare to those who can't afford it.

We are all presented with opportunities to do something meaningful. Do we take advantage of these opportunities? If not, why? Are we too busy? Do we feel that we aren't qualified? Do we not see the value of these opportunities when we are confronted by them?

Let's look at the following scenarios:

CASE ONE	Boaz and his friends took an after school video editing course. They received an email that their shul is looking for a volunteer to make a video for the shul's dinner. Boaz feels that he is always the one who volunteers for these types of opportunities and one of his friends should volunteer this time. Would it be proper for him to ignore the email and wait for one of his friends to volunteer?
CASE TWO	Rina was asked by her friends to head the chesed (community service) committee at her school. She has always been involved with the committee and knows that she is most capable of leading, but she also knows that there are other people who really want this position and she is happy to help without having an official leadership position. What should she do?
CASE THREE	Mr. Bronfarb, a close friend of Kelly's parents, is sick in the hospital and an email was sent that everyone who knows Mr. Bronfarb should try to recite Tehillim (Psalms) on his behalf this evening between 8 and 8:30. Kelly was planning on doing so until someone asked her to pick up Mr. Bronfarb's sister and drive her to the hospital at that time. She would ordinarily love to help, but would like to recite Tehillim at the same time as everyone else. Should she ask if there is someone else (who may not be planning to recite Tehillim) who can drive Mr. Bronfarb's sister?

Let's Examine the Sources

Why am I always the one?

When the Jewish people were at the edge of the sea, with the Egyptians right behind them, they were instructed to enter the sea. The Gemara quotes the opinion of R. Yehuda that the following transpired:

This one said, I am not going to go first into the sea and that one said, I am not going to go first into the sea. Nachshon b. Aminadav jumped in first ... For this reason [the tribe of] Yehuda [which Nachshon was a member of] merited being the leaders of the Jewish people.

Sotah 37a

זה אומר אין אני יורד תחילה לים וזה
אומר אין אני יורד תחילה לים קפץ נחשון
בן עמינדב וירד לים תחילה ... לפיכך זכה
יהודה לעשות ממשלה בישראל.
סוטה לז.

Questions for the Table:

- 1) Why do you think God insisted that the Jewish people enter the sea before He split it?
- 2) Why do you think Nachshon's actions merited that his tribe will be leaders of the Jewish people? What leadership qualities did he display that are important for all leaders?

The Mishna in Pirkei Avot cites a statement that at first glance describes the lesson we learn from Nachshon:

In a place where there are no people [to do something necessary], try to be the person.

Avot 2:5

במקום שאין אנשים השתדל להיות איש.
אבות ב:ה

Nevertheless, when we examine Rashi's commentary on the Mishna, we get a different message:

Try and engage in the needs of the community. However, in a place where there is someone else, you should engage in Torah study.

Rashi, Avot 2:5

השתדל ותעסוק בצרכי צבור אבל
במקום שיש איש אתה תעסוק בתורתך.
רש"י, אבות ב:ה

Questions for the Table:

Rashi's states that when something good needs to be done, and you are busy with important things such as Torah study, you should let someone else do it. Does this allow a person to say, "Let me wait and see if someone else is willing to do it"? How does one know when there really isn't anybody else to get involved?

Perhaps Rashi's comments can be better understood when we look at a few extra words that the Midrash adds to Nachshon's story:

While they were standing there seeking advice as to what to do, Nachshon b. Aminadav jumped ...

Mechilta, Beshalach no. 5

מתוך שהיו עומדין ונוטלין עצה קפץ נחשון בן עמינדב...
מכילתא, בשלח פרשה ה'

While everyone else was discussing who should be the first to be the volunteer, Nachshon didn't make any calculations. He just jumped in.

Questions for the Table:

- 1) In light of the Midrash, how can we understand Rashi's comments? When Rashi says not to volunteer, is he discussing a situation where a few people aren't sure who should volunteer or a situation where there already is a qualified person addressing the need?

2) What do you think Boaz from case #1 should do? Does it matter what Boaz would be doing with his time if he does not volunteer? How could Boaz encourage his friends to get more involved when these situations arise?

Give Someone Else a Chance?

Sometimes, a person might be offered a leadership position for which he/she feels unqualified. Let's look at how Moshe Rabbeinu responded when God asked him to lead the Jewish people. His initial reaction was:

Moshe said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and take the Jewish people out of Egypt?"

Shemot 3:11

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים מִי אֲנִכִּי כִּי אֵלֶּךָ אֶל פַּרְעֹה וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם.
שמות ג:יא

After a series of questions and answers, we find that Moshe accepts begrudgingly and God was not pleased with his response:

[Moshe] said, "My Lord, send whomever you will send." And God was angry with Moshe and He said, "Behold I know that Aharon, your brother, the Levite, can speak, and he is going out to greet you, and when he sees you, he will be very happy.

Shemot 4:13:-14

וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי אֲ-דַנִּי שְׁלַח נָא בְּיַד תְּשַׁלְּחָה. וַיַּחַר אַף ה' בְּמֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלֹא אֶהְרֵן אֶחָיו הֲלוֹי יִדְעָתִי כִּי דַבֵּר יִדְבֹר הוּא וְגַם הִנֵּה הוּא יֵצֵא לִקְרֹאתְךָ וְרָאֶה וְשָׂמַח בְּלָבוֹ.
שמות ד:יג-יד

Questions for the Table:

- 1) Why do you think Moshe said "Send whomever you will send"? Did he have someone else in mind?
- 2) Why do you think God was angry with Moshe's statement?

We find two approaches to understanding why Moshe didn't want to accept the leadership of the Jewish people. The first is a Midrash cited by Rashi:

The Rabbis said: Do you think that Moshe didn't want to lead? This is not true. Rather, he wanted to give the proper respect to Aharon. Moshe said, Before I was appointed, my brother Aharon was the prophet in Egypt for eighty years ... now I am going to encroach on his territory and he will be distressed because of it. For this reason, he didn't want to accept [leadership]. Immediately, God was angered with Moshe.

Shemot Rabbah 3:16

ורבנן אמרי סבור אתה שהיה מעכב משה לילך אינו כן אלא כמכבד לאהרן שהיה משה אומר עד שלא עמדתי היה אהרן אחי מתנבא להם במצרים שמונים שנה ... עכשיו אכנס בתחומו של אחי ויהיה מיצר בשביל כך לא היה מבקש לילך מיד ויחר אף ה' במשה.

שמות רבה ג:טז

Ramban offers a different approach:

The correct interpretation in my opinion is that Moshe said, please send anyone else, because there is no person in the world less qualified than me for this work. The reason why Moshe kept refusing was because of his great humility, more so than any person on the face of the earth. He didn't see himself becoming great and speaking to the king [of Egypt] and becoming glorified by saying "God has sent me," nor did he see himself worthy of leading the Jewish people out of Egypt and being their king.

Ramban, Shemot 4:13

והנכון בעיני, שלח נא ביד כל אשר תשלח, כי אין אדם בעולם שלא יהיה הגון יותר ממני לשליחות. והסבה למשה בכל הסרבנות הזאת ענותו הגדולה מכל האדם אשר על פני האדמה, שלא היה מוצא את לבו להתגדל ולדבר אל המלך ושיתפאר לאמר ה' שלחני, ולא על ישראל להוציאם ממצרים ולהיות עליהם מלך.

רמב"ן, שמות ד:יג

Question for the Table:

The commentators note that while God was angered by Moshe's comments, it was not with the same degree of anger that we normally find when the Torah says that God was angered (Rashi, Shemot 4:14) and perhaps Moshe's comments had some justification (Ibn Ezra, Shemot 4:14). What was the justification according to each approach presented above and why do you think God rejected it?

R. Yosef Karo, in his *Shulchan Aruch* discusses what one should do if one is asked to lead the prayer services:

If one is not the regular chazzan (leader), one should gently decline before going up to lead, but not too much, rather, the first time [one is asked] one should decline, the second time, one prepares oneself to stand (to lead prayers) and the third time, one stands. If the person asking to lead is an important person, one should not decline at all.

Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 53:16

מי שאינו ש"צ קבוע צריך לסרב מעט קודם שירד לפני התיבה ולא יותר מדאי אלא פעם ראשונה מסרב וכשיאמרו לו פעם שניה מכין עצמו כמו שרוצה לעמוד ובפעם שלישית יעמוד. ואם האומר לו שירד הוא אדם גדול אינו מסרב לו כלל. שלחן ערוך, אורח חיים נג:טז

Questions for the Table:

- 1) What do you think is the point of this procedure if the person asking and the person being asked both know what is going to happen?
- 2) How can this law help us understand the dialogue between God and Moshe Rabbeinu?
- 3) What lessons from the discussion can be applied to Rina's situation in case #2? How should she handle herself practically?

Prayer vs. Action

When someone experiences or hears about a crisis, prayer is an appropriate response. However, there are times when prayer is not appropriate.

When the Jews were standing at the edge of the sea, the Torah states that the Jews were calling out to God for help. God responded:

God said to Moshe: Why do you cry out to me? Speak to the Jewish people and they shall travel.

Shemot 14:15

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה מַה תִּצְעַק אֵלַי דְּבַר אֵל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ.
שמות יד:טו

The Gemara provides some background to this statement:

At that time, Moshe was reciting a lengthy prayer. God said to him, my beloved are drowning in the sea and you are reciting lengthy prayers? [Moshe] said to [God], what can I do? [God] said to [Moshe] Speak to the Jewish people and they shall travel.

Sotah 37a

באותה שעה היה משה מאריך בתפלה אמר לו הקב"ה ידידי טובעים בים ואתה מאריך בתפלה לפני אמר לפניו רבוננו של עולם ומה בידי לעשות אמר לו דבר אל בני ישראל ויסעו.
סוטה לז.

Questions for the Table:

- 1) How does one know when it is a time for action and when it is a time for prayer?

2) What do you think is more important for Kelly to do in case #3? To help drive Mr. Bronfarb's sister or to pray at that time?

We are all presented with opportunities to take initiative. We may hesitate because we want someone else equally qualified to do it instead, because we want to give someone else a chance or because we don't think the particular initiative is important. Each of these reasons for hesitancy has its merit and can be employed on occasion. However, after learning about Nachshon's example, we can see how important it is to take the initiative. Despite our resistance, sometimes we need to just jump in.

Compiled by Rabbi Josh Flug, Director of Torah Research, Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF AUTHORS CITED

R. Shlomo Yitzchaki (also known as Rashi, 1040-1105) is arguably the most popular commentator on Tanach and Talmud. His commentaries are considered standard for almost all printings of Tanach or Talmud containing commentary. He lived in Northern France.

R. Moshe ben Nachman (also known as Ramban and Nachmanides, 1194-1270) was a leader of Spanish Jewry during his time. He wrote many works including a commentary on the Torah and a commentary on the Talmud. In his later years, he moved to Israel and established a synagogue in the Old City of Jerusalem, which exists to the present day.

R. Avraham Ibn Ezra (1092-1167) is most famous for his commentary on the Torah, though he authored numerous works on Jewish Philosophy, Hebrew Grammar, Mathematics and Astronomy. Born in Spain, he spent much of his life wandering from country to country to escape persecution and in doing so was able to spread his ideas to many Jewish communities in Europe, North Africa and Israel.

R. Yosef Karo (1488-1575) is most well-known for his *Shulchan Aruch*, The Code of Jewish Law. Born in Toledo Spain, his family was forced to leave Spain in 1492 when they settled in Portugal and then Bulgaria. He eventually settled in the Land of Israel about 1535. Aside from *Shulchan Aruch*, he authored numerous works including *Kesef Mishneh* and *Beit Yosef*.