

THE ILLUSION OF INDEPENDENCE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

From the first moment that G-d revealed Himself to Moshe at the Burning Bush, Moshe was faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, G-d was sending him to save the Jews. This would encourage a dependency on the part of the Bnai Yisroel for their savior Moshe. On the other hand, his ultimate mission was to direct the allegiance of the nation to G-d alone, and foster their complete dependency upon G-d. However, the more involved Moshe became in the lives of the people, the more their dependency upon Moshe grew. How was Moshe, as their leader and teacher, going to direct their dependency away from himself and toward G-d?

In many ways, Moshe's dilemma mirrors our obligation as parents and educators. We too must, at the same time, teach our children and students to be independent, while the process of parenting and instruction fosters dependency. However, there is a fundamental difference between the two. With parenting and teaching, there is a natural tendency on the part of the student and child toward independence. Therefore, in most instances, the parent and teacher engage in equal measures of instruction and discipline. Instruction is the imparting of information and the teaching of basic life skills. Discipline is the redirection of individual expression and the training we give our charges to make them responsible for themselves and society. It is a process of curbing independence rather than a fostering of dependency.

Religious training and commitment, on the other hand, is a constant battle between our natural inclination toward independence and our obligation to completely subjugate our independence in relation to Hashem. Moshe's need to discipline the Jews would be in response to the nation's expression of independence away from G-d. Each consequence would attempt to rehabilitate their individuality toward dependency upon G-d, rather than simply refining their sense of independence to be more responsible. His teachings would present a constant conflict between our obligation to do as G-d wants and our desire to do as we want.

If we analyze this further we can see that in many ways parenting and teaching really do mirror Moshe's dilemma. The fundamental challenge facing us all is between doing as we wish or subjecting ourselves to the demands of an authority figure. Whether it is the authority of G-d or the authority of society, we are in a constant battle. Just as a child or student has a natural tendency toward independence, so too do we have a natural tendency toward independence. Just as a student or child must be trained to curb his independence for the greater good of the family,

classroom or society; so too, we had to curb our independence for the greater good of our relationship with G-d. However, there is still a fundamental difference between the mission that Moshe Rabbeinu had to undertake and the goal of parenting and teaching.

The process of teaching and parenting assumes a gradual maturation on the part of the child and student. This maturation works in tandem with the instruction and discipline offered by the teacher and the parent. The expectation is that, at some point, the processes of instruction, discipline, and maturation will temper the natural tendency toward independence. The independent child will metamorphous into a responsible adult who is willing and able to balance his needs and desires with his obligations toward G-d and society. Moshe's mission and expectations were quite different.

Moshe was dealing with an adult population who had serious reasons for challenging the notion of subjugating their newly gained independence to an unknown and unseen G-d. This was not a simple matter of intellectual and physical maturation that eventually kicks in, given enough time and experiences. The Bnai Yisroel had suffered enslavement for 210 years. The Bnai Yisroel had developed their own answers and philosophies to explain the seemingly chaotic injustices of a cruel and heartless destiny. The Bnai Yisroel had been spiritually challenged to understand the contrast between their illustrious beginnings as the "children of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov" and their ignoble end as "slaves to Pharaoh. Therefore, Moshe's mission was far more challenging than the anticipated difficulties of "Tzar Geidul Banim - the pains of child rearing." How was Moshe going to reeducate and redirect the nation's newly found independence from Pharaoh, into a voluntary subjugation of that independence to Hashem?

A further analyses of the exodus from Egypt reveals that the circumstances of the nation's flight from Egypt was designed to highlight the contrast between the nations' assumed independence and Moshe's mission to motivate their dependency on Hashem.

First of all, the entire sequence of the 10 plagues was an overt display of G-d's control over nature, humankind, and society. The totality of His manifest power forced the Bnai Yisroel and the Egyptians to acknowledge their own impotence and insignificance in contrast to G-d. At the same time, the Jews reveled in their newly "gifted" freedom and independence from the oppression of their former masters.

Secondly, the Bnai Yisroel taking the wealth of Egypt prefaced their actual departure from Egypt. "And they emptied Egypt!" (12:36). At the same time, they were so hurried to leave that they were unable to take any other provisions except for Matzo. (12:39). This meant that some three million people would eventually be left without food or water in a barren wilderness. At the same time that these former slaves were carrying away the wealth of Egypt feeling like they were finally masters of their own destiny, they weren't even able to provide for their own most basic needs! With all their wealth they could not buy a glass of water or a crust of bread. What a contrast between their reality of dependence and their illusion of independence!

Thirdly, following their miraculous flight from Egypt, the nation found themselves caught between a rock and a hard place. With the enraged, elite forces of Pharaoh behind them, and the depths of the sea in front of them, Moshe their savior had failed them! It had all been a terrible mistake! "Were there no graves in Mitzrayim that you took us to die in the wilderness . . . It is better that we should serve Mitzrayim than to die in the wilderness!" (14:11-12). Moshe answered them: Now you know the truth! The dream of your own independence; the assumed control that came with your newfound wealth; and the dependency you have developed upon me as your savior, has all been an illusion! I can do nothing to save you! "Do not fear! Stand fast and see the salvation of Hashem . . . He shall do battle . . . and you shall remain silent!" (14:13-14).

The aftermath of the Parting of the Sea was a singular moment when the nation fully understood their relationship with G-d and with Moshe. "And they believed in Hashem and in Moshe His servant. (14:31). Moshe was finally acknowledged as the servant of G-d. He had no other personal significance other than his appointment as the servant of G-d. It was G-d who had saved them. It would be G-d, not Moshe, who would continue to protect them!

The Torah records five further incidents of the Independence vs. Dependence conflict, culminating in the battle against Amalek. Each of these incidences continues the theme of the conflict between the nations newfound independence and wealth in contrast to the reality of their absolute dependency on G-d.

Good Shabbos.

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