

MOSHE AND AHARON NEVER LET THEIR MISSION BECOME THEIR "CAREER"

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Rabbi Frand on Parshas Va'eyra

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Moshe and Aharon Never Let Their Mission Become Their "Career"

At the end of the section delineating the lineage of Moshe and Aharon, the pasuk [verse] says, "This is Aharon and Moshe, to whom Hashem said 'Take the Children of Israel out of Egypt according to their legions.'" [Shemos 6:26] Rashi points out that there are places in the Torah where the name Aharon precedes that of Moshe, and there are places where the name of Moshe precedes Aharon. This teaches that they were both equal. Although it was Moshe who was charged with the primary task of leading the Jews out of Egypt, either brother was worthy of that mission.

In the next pasuk, the Torah says: "They are the ones who spoke to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to take the Children of Israel out of the land of Egypt; this is Moshe and Aharon." Rashi comments on the redundant mention of Moshe and Aharon in the second pasuk (27), after they were just mentioned as the subjects of the previous pasuk (26). Rashi explains that the redundancy is teaching that "they remained steadfast in their mission and in their righteousness, from beginning to end." They remained the same Moshe and Aharon throughout the entire experience of the Exodus from Egypt and throughout the trials and tribulations of the Wilderness. They did not change. They remained loyal to their mandate and to their righteousness.

Rav Elya Meir Bloch points out a basic trait of human nature: There are many times that our intentions are pure and altruistic when we start a project or begin an endeavor. We do it strictly for the sake of Heaven (l'shem shamayim). But after a while, when a person invests of himself into an institution or into a project, it often becomes more about "him" rather than about the noble cause.

This is true in professional life as well. People enter professions - law or medicine, for example -

sometimes with the most altruistic of reasons. They want to help mankind; they want to help humanity; they want to defend the poor and so on and so forth. But in the course of building up a practice and building up a business, they are often overtaken by other considerations. Suddenly, they are no longer doing it for the 'sake of Heaven' or for the altruistic reasons as when they had started. It is no longer the noble profession itself. It is 'me'. It is 'my ego.'

People become involved in a shul, in a school, or in other institutions. They start out l'shem shamayaim. But they invest so much of themselves in it that it ceases to be a detached institution; it is now the person himself (with all the personal 'baggage' that he brings).

Chazal are pointing out that when Moshe Rabbeinu was first offered the opportunity of taking the Jewish people out of Egypt his reaction was "Not me. This honor should go to Aharon. He is my older brother. He is as worthy of the task as I am." Moshe started his mission with the most noble of intentions. Aharon also began with the most noble of intentions. He was not jealous of his younger brother one iota. When he greeted Moshe upon the latter's return from Midian, he was joyous in his heart [Shemos 4:14]. Both brothers entered their respective jobs with the most noble and pristine ambition.

However, the significance of Moshe's and Aharon's accomplishment is that "it was this same Moshe and Aharon" - throughout their mission they maintained the same righteousness and altruism. They never let the mission become merely their jobs or careers. They never let their egos become so involved that they overshadowed their missions.

The proof of Moshe's altruism is the fact that he broke the Luchos [Tablets of Stone]. After investing 40 days and 40 nights of super-human effort and fasting when he went to receive them, if he had one iota of ego in him, Moshe would not have broken the Luchos. "I should break the Luchos? No! I've put too much effort in them to break them." He overcame that natural instinct, because he never let his ego become bigger than the mission itself. He remained with his mission and with his righteousness throughout.

This is very important to keep in mind when we do become involved in communal activities and institutions. The mission must always be greater than us. We must always be able to stand back and ask: "What does the mission demand? What is good for the institution?" rather than being overcome by our personal ego gratification.

The Price of Pretending You Are a God

Sometimes when a person is trying to arrange a meeting with a busy executive, the trick is to figure out "Where can I catch him?" G-d tells Moshe where he can "catch" Pharaoh: "Go to Pharaoh in the morning - behold! He goes out to the water..." [Shemos 7:15]. Rashi provides background to this

practice of the Egyptian monarch: "Behold he goes out to the water to relieve himself. For Pharaoh would pretend to be a god, and would say that he does not need to relieve himself. He would arise early and go out to the Nile and secretly attend to his bodily needs there."

Pharaoh deified himself. A major difference between gods and human beings is that gods don't have to use the bathroom. Therefore, Pharaoh had a problem. If he had a bathroom that everyone knew about, people would realize that he was not a god. Therefore, Pharaoh had a morning constitution. He would go to the Nile each morning when no one would see him and take care of his bodily needs. That was it for the rest of the day!

There are certainly at least occasions when 'once a day' would not suffice. This had to be a source of great distress and concern for Pharaoh. He had to at least sometimes ask himself, 'is this charade worth it?' Even assuming the people figured out that he wasn't a god, he was still an all-powerful ruler. He was an old world king who could say 'off with your head' if he didn't like the way someone parted his hair. For all intents and purposes it really didn't matter if he was a god or not. He was an absolute monarch regardless.

So then why did Pharaoh have to put himself through this daily discomfort to keep up this silly charade? It brought him very little in the way of added respect or admiration. But, says Rav Chaim Shmulevitz, this is how crazy people become regarding their kavod [honor]. People will twist themselves into pretzels for the smallest amount of kavod, in Pharaoh's case, for the difference between people thinking he is an omnipotent human being and their thinking he is an omnipotent god. For that insignificant difference, which was of no practical value to Pharaoh, he made himself painfully uncomfortable on a daily basis. This is the blinding power of kavod.

The Birkas Mordechai (Rav Mordechai Ezrachi) uses this insight to answer a well known question that many commentaries raise. Moshe Rabbeinu argued to G-d: "Behold even the children of Israel did not listen to me - how can I expect Pharaoh to listen and I am 'uncircumcised of lips'. [Shemos 6:12]." This is one of the few Biblical examples of the famous Talmudic principle: Kal V'Chomer [a fortiori]. If the Children of Israel who wanted to hear the words "you are getting out of Egypt" did not listen to me, argued Moshe, certainly Pharaoh who would be loath to hear such a message will not listen.

The commentaries all ask that this is not a valid Kal V'Chomer because the pasuk itself explains why the Children of Israel did not listen to Moshe -- "due to shortness of breath and hard labor" [Shemos 6:9]. Since this preoccupation did not apply to Pharaoh, perhaps he would listen to Moshe. The Kal V'Chomer is thus invalidated.

Rav Mordechai Ezrachi argues that this was a indeed a good Kal V'Chomer. True, Klal Yisrael was preoccupied. They couldn't pay attention to Moshe because of the pressure of hard labor. But Pharaoh could not listen either. He also had a terrible obsession and a terrible pressure. He had to go around the whole day playing 'god' to the extent that he had to control his bathroom habits to support his charade. This was at least as overwhelming a distraction as that faced by Klal Yisrael.

Hence the Kal V'Chomer was a valid logical argument.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Va'eyra are provided below:

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