



Parashat Shemot



English version

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THE ART OF EMPATHY

ומלשה הָיָה רֹעֵה אֶת־צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתְנוֹ כִּתְּנוּ מִדְּנוּ וַיִּנְהַג אֶת־הַצֹּאן אַחֲרֵי הַמִּדְבָּר וַיָּבֹא אֶל־הַר הַאֱלֹהִים הַרְבֵּה: *And Moshe was shepherding his father in law Yitro's flock, and he led the flock after the desert, and he came to the mountain of G-d in Horeb.* (Shemot 3;1)

The part of the Torah, which describes the episode of Moshe being appointed by G-d to be the Jewish leader, begins with the words that Moshe was shepherding the flock. The Midrash tells us that Moshe's shepherding was why G-d chose Moshe to be the Jewish Leader. Here is the Midrash, word for word.

Our Rabbis said: When Moshe Rabbenu was shepherding Yitro's flock, a young goat fled. Moshe ran after it, and he reached the goat when the goat stopped running. The goat had reached a pool of water and had stopped to drink. When Moshe came close, he said, "I did not know that you were running because you were thirsty! You must not only be thirsty. You are probably now tired as well." Moshe carried the goat on his shoulder as he began his walk back to the flock. HKBH said: You have mercy to shepherd the flock of flesh and blood (Yitro). You will shepherd my sheep, the Jewish people. (Shemot Rabbah 2;2)

It seems that Moshe's upgrade was because of his empathy for a goat! Why is empathy the essential trait of a leader? There are so many qualities that are important character strengths of a leader. Communication, Integrity, Accountability, Humility, Resilience, Vision, Influence, Positivity, Delegation, Confidence, to name just a few. I am

sure that Moshe had some amazing characteristics that could have made him worthy of the job. But the deciding trait to give Moshe the baton of leadership was his empathy. Why empathy? What is empathy anyway, and why is it so important?

Empathy means putting others ahead of yourself. It is the experience of understanding another person's thoughts, feelings, and condition from his or her point of view, rather than from one's own. Empathy shows that you care, value, and understand. It means listening attentively, putting your complete focus on the person in front of you without becoming distracted. It means you are present to allow others to have their moment showing them that they are heard and that they matter. Empathy is seeing the world through someone else's eyes, entering into their feelings. It means you are patient to listen, understand, assist, and support, not to advise or fix or reply. Sometimes to empathize is to merely "be."

When G-d reveals Himself to Moshe in a burning bush, He chose specifically a thorn bush. Rashi explains that G-d chose a thorn bush, to demonstrate, עִמּוֹ אֲנֹכִי בַצָּרָה. *I am with him* (the Jewish nation) *in pain*. The Midrash teaches that the reason why G-d chose a thorn bush is to show that there is no place that He is absent. He is found even in thorns, even in the pain and suffering and challenges.

When G-d told Moshe to tell the Jews that He sent him, He told Moshe to relay to the Jewish leaders the message Pakod Pakadti. After Moshe revealed



these words to the leaders and did some magic tricks, the Jewish leaders approached Serah Bat Asher, the oldest Jew in Egypt, to consult with her if she felt that this was the true redeemer. The tricks did not impress Serah. But when she heard that Moshe used the words Pakod Pakadti, Serah jumped up and said, “He is the redeemer!” Those are the words that Yosef told the brothers Pakod Yifkod! That is the secret password!

What does the word Pakad mean, anyway? I was taught that the meaning of those words is that G-d remembered. But the word to remember is not Poked, it is Zocher!

R’ Shimshon R Hirsh explains Poked to mean something much more profound. The word Pakod means when circumstances are set up in a way for a person to reach their life purpose, their Tefikid. (See R”Sh”R”H’ here and Bereshit 33;3) The word at its root is closer to meaning inspection then remember. The word פקד sounds like the word בגד, clothes. This is because G-d is tailoring for you your Tefikid via your struggles and challenges. When you feel that you do not want your difficulties in life, that you absolutely would never choose your struggles... G-d is tailoring your purpose on the planet. He is so close, literally like a tailor, custom tailoring your difficulties to measure up with your life purpose, custom fit to your very own soul! This is because G-d understands you better than anyone else, even better than yourself.

The Midrash tells us another reason why G-d revealed Himself in a thorn bush. The Jews in Exile are compared to the thorns. The Klei Yakar explains this to mean that the reason why the Jews are in exile is their thorn-like behavior, when they do not feel for each other.

The reason why Yosef and his brothers ended up in Egypt was because the lack of empathy for each other. The brothers did not see Yosef’s side of the story. And Yosef was not seeing the side of the

brothers. Moshe was the leader of empathy. He could be the one to take the Jews out of Egypt. Mitzrayim, comes from the word Meitzar, a narrow-minded look at the people in your life. Gossip and slander, not accepting and understanding people, is the cause for the Jews to be in Exile. אכן נודע הדבר (see Rashi Shemot 2;14)

People confuse empathy with sympathy. There is a huge difference between the two. Sympathy is when you share the feelings of another; empathy is when you understand the feelings of another but do not necessarily share them. The art of empathy is the art of understanding. People in pain want to feel understood, more than they want people to share in their grief. “Just knowing that someone else knows what I am going through is the greatest relief.” Most times, you cannot share in the pain of the person, for you are not going through what that person is going through. But you can try your best to understand.

G-d is the Master of empathy. הַכֹּל־צֹרֶתָם לְוִי צָר In all of their suffering (of the Jews), the suffering is to Him. (Yeshayahu 63;9) G-d knows of what we suffer, for He is custom tailoring something amazing.

So how do we bring about the Geulah, the final redemption? Here are the selfie steps to master the art of empathy and bring the Geulah:

- Understand that empathy is not easy. It is understanding and seeing the world from someone else’s eyes.
- Be patient in trying to understand. Don’t try to fix the problem.
- Focus on the other. Forget about yourself for the moment. Pause your judgement.
- Practice empathy even in the smallest of issues. Moshe merited being a leader for having empathy over a tired, young goat.

BEATING THE SYSTEM

There is a sad joke that goes around the yeshiva world each year at this time. Ben Hazmanim

usually starts with a fast. Tisha BAv , Yom Kippur, Taanit Esther. And Sof Zman, the beginning of the



end, the decline of momentum for the weaker boys, is from the fast before that. Shiva Assar B'Tamuz, Tzom Gedalia, *Assarah B'tevet*.

If you drive on Menachem Begin Highway at 95 kmph where the speed limit is 80, you fly under the speed cameras without getting a ticket. To get through the Yeshiva system and be a “good boy” and fly under the radar of keeping sedarim, you are still “on time” for seder, even if you get there half an hour late. You can leave seder a half an hour early and still consider that you were there to the end. If you come to Shacharit right on time for Barachu and leave as you say Aleinu at the Minyan Factory, then you might even be able to spend less time on Shacharit than you do on Maariv. Then you *really* “beat the system”. When you “trim all the fat” off your learning, off your davening, there isn't that much “meat” left to your spirituality or your connection with G-d. I am sure that girls also have their way of “beating the system”, if they want to, in their tzniut, davening, or devoting their time and effort to building families.

Anti-system articles always draw the most attention. What I will write sounds in some way anti-system although it really isn't. The problem with the Yeshiva system is that *as an academic one*, it is a failure. It was always a failure. It was meant to be a failure. As Rashi says, in Kohelet, 7:28, בְּנוֹהַג שְׁבַע עוֹלָם אֵלַי נִכְנָסִים לְמִקְרָא אֵין יוֹצְאִים מֵהֶם, להצליח שראויים למשנה אלא מאה ואותם מאה שנכנסו למשנה אין יוצאים מהם לגמרא אלא עשרה ואותן עשרה שנכנסין לגמרא אין מצליח מהם אלא אחד להוראה הרי אחד מאלף: A thousand people come to learn in the system, and only one comes out who knows how to be Posek Halacha, a true Rabbi. This can be very depressing. A great turnoff. As an academic system, if you have a school in which 1000 enter in order to become a doctor, or a lawyer, and only one comes out to be a doctor or a lawyer, the school will close down. But our system exists and will continue to exist. Because our system is only a failure in terms of being an academic one, for preparing people with a plan for the future. For something to *do* in life. How many jobs are there in Kodesh anyway? How many Kodesh jobs will help

you support your family, long term? Our system is good at only one thing. For building people what to *be* in life. To rewire your B3, your **beliefs**, your **behaviors** and what and who you **belong** to. *At that, our system is the best system in the world.*

Our system is not to build nice, good boys who aren't troublemakers, either. It is to build leaders. To build people with a connection with G-d. Allow me to explain. Hold on, and get ready for the most fundamental, unknown lesson of Torah Chinuch.

The Rama (Y"D 81;7) writes the Halacha, “The milk of an Egyptian woman is like the milk of a Jewess. And still, do not give a child to drink from an Egyptian woman, if it is possible from a Jewess. Because the milk of a gentile blocks the heart and creates a bad nature.” The Vilna Gaon brings the Rashba, that this is sourced from 3-month-old baby Moshe Rabbenu, who was not willing to nurse from the Egyptian women, because he would eventually speak to the Shechina.

R' Yaakov Kamenetzky asks how we can learn this halacha from Moshe, having it pertain to every Jewish child. The whole reason for Moshe's insistence on nursing from a Jewess was because he was, in the future, going to speak to the Shechina! Will every child speak to the Shechina!?! And R Yaakov writes, in Emet Layaakov, that real Chinuch is to ensure that our upbringing of the child is such that it will be possible to speak to the Shechina! *That is the fundamental of real Chinuch.*

When Yosef was about to sin with Potifar's wife, he jumped back and said something to her that can blow your mind. *G-d regularly comes and chooses from the members of my family, from the best of them, someone to be brought up as an Olah sacrifice (Yitzhak). He regularly comes and reveals Himself in prophesy in the middle of the night. If I listen to you and sleep with you, G-d might come to me in the middle of the night and find me impure (M Rabbah).* That is how Yaakov brought up his children, ready at any minute to speak to the Shechina! G-d can suddenly “appear” in your life



and expect you to perform your Tefkid, your mission in this world. And if you had a good chinuch, you will be extremely successful.

When I was in eighth grade, I noticed a 6th grader not saying Aleinu. I told him that when he says Aleinu, all of the angels in Heaven stop to listen (See Yalkut Yosef Tefillah 132; 17 in the name of the student of the Maharashal). The boy suddenly opened his Siddur and said every word. It took him almost 5 minutes! I remember the time I gave more tzedakka than usual to a recently widowed woman to pay for her sons' camp. The middleman called me, "Yosef!! You brought tears to her eyes!! She was so thankful, grateful to G-d that she can have a breather!! Yosef, the skies are open for you now! Ask anything you want from G-d, and I am sure He will grant your greatest wishes!!!" I did pray, but I realized, then, how many times in life we do have that time to turn to G-d with a request or with thanks, how many times in life we have the Heavens open, and we let the opportunity go by, without taking advantage of it. But isn't that what we were brought up to do, to speak to the Shechina?!?!

When you pray, you are talking to G-d. When you learn, G-d is talking to you. How many times we can say Amen, Yehe Sheme Rabba, how many times we can come to learn Torah in the study hall and G-d is waiting for us. This is what we are here for. This is why we bring kids to the world, so that we can raise them in such a way. The reason why sometimes we do not raise them with this in mind,

is because we do not look at ourselves as "speaking to the Shechina". What a shame!

The whole academic part of our system is not an end in itself. It is not about effective learning, not about memory. Not about competition, homework or report cards. It is not about how many Siyumim you make, how good you are at listening to shiur or able to say a Shiur, or how well you did on your Semicha test. It is how you are able to use those great concepts or principles that you learn about to connect more and more to the Shechina, and ready to bring the Shechina into your life. There were people who were geniuses in Torah who did not excel in their Yirat Shamayim or in righteous behavior, despite the fact that they were academic heroes. The problem why people burn out in the system, feel abused by it or simply don't "make it" is because they do not understand this fundamental principle of chinuch. Or their teachers or parents did not understand this. The answer to all chinuch issues, the fundamental that needs to be addressed, is not about the Mechanech, or the one who is on the receiving end of the Chinuch. It is about the relationship with the Shechina, and making connection to the Shechina possible. Staying clear of anything that can weaken that connection.

Those who "beat" the system misunderstand it. It is built to help you, just as the speed limit is there to save you from hurting yourself. It is the easiest system to beat. But the only one who you beat is yourself.

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