



THE PERSON

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IN THE PARSHA

Unexpected Leadership Lessons

You have surely noticed the great changes in the way charitable causes do their fundraising these days. There was a time when fundraisers, who often were themselves dignified and prestigious rabbinical figures, knocked on the doors of potential philanthropists in the hope that they would not be turned away. At best, they would be greeted at the door and given a modest contribution. They then proceeded to knock upon the next door.

This experience was inefficient, time consuming, and often humiliating.

In recent times, things have changed. Through the power of electronic communication, it is now possible to post a brief message promoting a charitable cause in dramatic and graphic terms to an audience of thousands. The money comes rolling in.

Little time is expended. No knocking on doors, no embarrassment, no travel expenses, and, regrettably, no accountability.

This technique, often referred to as “crowd

funding,” is not only a tool for getting people to donate money. It is also a tool for influencing people in other ways. It is used for political purposes, for education, for indoctrination, and for teaching morality. It is a tool for leadership.

Were similar tools available in the past? I maintain that there were such tools and that they were available to gifted leaders throughout the course of human history. One such leader was Moshe.

That brings us to this week’s double Torah portion, *VaYakhel-Pekudei* (Exodus 35:1-40:38). Here I have the privilege of quoting from the newly available *Chumash* translation written by the late lamented Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks:

“Moshe assembled all the community of Israel... Then Moshe said to all the community of Israel, ‘This is what the Lord has commanded. Bring of what is yours an offering to the Lord. Let everyone whose heart moves him bring an offering to the Lord: gold, silver, and bronze; sky-blue, purple, and crimson wool...’ So all the community of Israel left Moshe’s presence. And they came, everyone whose heart inspired him and whose spirit moved him, and brought an offering for the Lord...” (Exodus 35:1-21)

On the phrase “all the community of Israel left Moshe’s presence,” Rabbi Chaim ibn

Attar, the eighteenth century author of the classic commentary *Ohr HaChaim*, comments:

“Note that they all left Moshe’s presence as one, quickly and in unison, to bring their contributions. None stayed behind even for a moment. They left his presence before he gave them permission to leave, although the Talmud tells us in the tractate *Yoma* that a disciple should not depart from his master until he receives permission. But, in this case, their enthusiasm prompted them to ignore that protocol.”

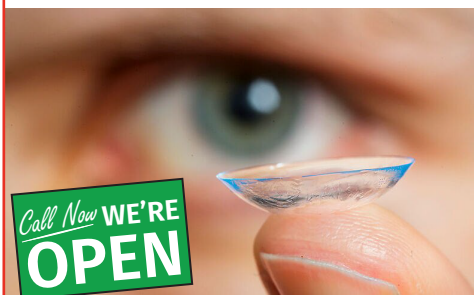
Subsequently, in chapter 36 verse six, we read: “Moshe ordered an announcement to be made throughout the camp, ‘Let no man or woman make anything more as an offering for the sanctuary.’ So the people brought no more; for what they already had was more than enough for all the work that was to be done.”

Note that an “order” was necessary to prevent the Israelites from bringing anything further, so great and so strong was their desire to comply with the *mitzvah* of contributing to the construction of the Tabernacle.

Moshe had no system of electronic communication at hand. He did not even have a loudspeaker. And, as we very well know, he not only lacked eloquence, but suffered from a speech impediment. Personal charisma was not his forte.

His enthusiasm, his sincerity, and his impeccable integrity were what enabled him to sway the entire camp. A leader with those characteristics need not knock on

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doors and plead for handouts. His words meet with instantaneous and unanimous acceptance.

That is one model of leadership, but one confined to but a few exemplary individuals.

But there is another entirely different type of leader mentioned in the second of this week's two Torah portions. He is described as having some very specialized skills, but he certainly is no Moshe. I refer to Bezalel, who is referenced in one of the opening verses in this week's *Parshat Pekudei*. We first encountered him last week in *Parshat Ki Tisa*. There, we read:

“The Lord said to Moshe, ‘See, I have called by name Bezalel, son of Uri, son of Hur from the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with a divine spirit, with wisdom, understanding, and knowledge in every craft. He will fashion works of art in gold, silver, and bronze. He will cut stones for setting, carve wood, and work in every craft. I have assigned to him Oholiav, son of Ahisamach, from the tribe of Dan... They will be able to make all I have commanded you...’” (Exodus 31:1-6)

Obviously, Bezalel was a talented man, blessed by the Lord Himself with the skills of craftsmanship. And he had a very able partner, blessed with a similar skill set.

Why do I maintain that Bezalel was a praiseworthy leader? He was definitely a versatile artisan, but a leader?

This question is intensified by a passage in the Talmud tractate *Berachot* 55a. It reads:

“Rabbi Yochanan said: Three phenomena are proclaimed in advance by the Holy One Blessed Be He Himself, and they are *ra'av, sova*, and a *parnas tov* (hunger, plenty, and a good leader).”

The example given of a *parnas tov*, a good leader, is none other than Bezalel.

Rabbi Chaim Zeitchik, a heroic Holocaust survivor and a prolific writer on the subject of morality, is troubled by this Talmudic passage. He does not belittle Bezalel's role as the Tabernacle's master craftsman. He simply questions why he is chosen as the archetype of a great leader. What outstanding leadership qualities did he display?

Rabbi Zeitchik's quotes a midrashic passage (*Yalkut Shimoni* Kings I: 185). It reads: “Rabbi Levi said the name of Rabbi Chanina, ‘Two tribes were selected as partners in the production of the Tabernacle, Bezalel from the royal tribe of Judah and Oholiav from the lowly tribe of Dan...’”

Rabbi Zeitchik wonders about the significance of this choice of dual craftsmen.

His moving and instructive response follows, freely translated from his work *Ohr Chadash al HaTorah*:

“A person's moral character can be tested by the extent to which he continues to work for the benefit of the community when another person is assigned to be his partner. Is he envious of his new partner? Is he concerned that others will be impressed by his partner's competence? Does he see his partner as a rival? For this reason, the Almighty assigned the task of constructing the Tabernacle to members of

two different tribes, the royal tribe of Judah and the lowly tribe of Dan. The Almighty could then observe whether each would remain fully dedicated to the task at hand or whether one or both of them would yield to feelings of resentment and envy to the extent that they would fail at their magnificent assignment.

“For some people are only able to demonstrate excellence and remain dedicated to challenging objectives when they are in charge. They need to subordinate others to their way of doing things. Only when they are the sole decision-makers, fully in command, are they able to function. But when they are required to collaborate with another, to work as part of a team, they gradually lose control and become lax, sabotaging the entire project in the process.”

Rabbi Zeitchik, a twentieth century Jewish moralist, thus masterfully cites talmudic and midrashic texts, all based upon careful readings of biblical selections from this week’s Torah portion, all with the purpose of teaching us a lesson that is so very important today.

The lesson is this: There are occasional leaders who can inspire greater numbers of people through their unique spiritual gifts. *Moshe Rabbenu*, Moses our Master, was one of them.

But all of us can learn a different kind of leadership skill. We can learn to work collaboratively. We can subdue our egos, recognize the worth of colleagues, and give credit and praise to all who contribute to humanity’s vital tasks. ■



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