THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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Let's Talk It Over

I have long believed that all conflicts between people could be settled if the parties to the dispute would agree to simply sit down together and talk. There are, of course, times when I have come to question this belief. I often wonder whether it is not merely a vain fantasy of mine, or perhaps just wishful thinking. I have been forced to admit that some interpersonal disputes are intractable and that no amount of discussion could resolve them. But, by and large, I still adhere to this long-held belief and try, in both my personal life and various professional roles, to put that belief into practice. I attempt to get even the most stubborn opponents to sit down face-to-face and discuss their differences.

I had the good fortune during my training in the practice of marital therapy to experience the tutelage of a master marriage counselor. Her name was Ruth G. Newman, and she passed away long ago. I have forgotten much of what she taught me, but I clearly remember her insistence that the role of the marriage counselor was not to counsel. Rather, it was to get the husband and wife to talk to each other and to truly listen to each other. I witnessed her work many times, and was amazed at how even her most stubborn clients were able to overcome their stubbornness, engage in true dialogue, and achieve understanding of the other person's point of view.

In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Bo* (*Exodus* 10:1-13:16), we encounter an individual who arguably was the most stubborn person in the history of mankind. I speak, of course, of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, who refused to release the Jewish people from their cruel and arduous enslavement, even after being subjected to an array of miraculous plagues. His obstinacy was partly the product of his own character but was immeasurably reinforced by the Almighty's commitment to "harden his heart." Already in last week's Torah portion, *Va'era,* Moses was put on notice, at the very beginning of his mission, to "speak to Pharaoh to let the Israelites depart from his land," but not to expect great success. Moses was forewarned: "But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, that I may multiply My signs and marvels in the land of Egypt." (*Exodus* 7:2-3)

By the time we read this week's *parasha,* Pharaoh and his people have already undergone no less than seven mighty plagues, with an impending eighth plague in the offing. But the very first verse of our *parasha* tells us not to expect Pharaoh's obstinacy to soften: "Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his courtiers…" Surely, if there was ever

one person for whom conversation and the counsel of others were simply out of the question, Pharaoh was that man.

Nevertheless, Moses persists in his mission. He and Aaron go to Pharaoh and confront him in the name of the Lord: "How long will you refuse to humble yourself…Let My people go…For if you refuse…I will bring locusts on your territory…They shall devour the surviving remnant that was left to you after the hail…They shall eat away all your trees…They shall fill your palaces…Something that neither your fathers nor fathers' fathers have seen from the day they appeared on earth to this day."

Having delivered this dire threat, Moses then does something which is unprecedented and which catches us off guard. We are told: "With that he turned and left Pharaoh's presence." He does not wait for

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Pharaoh's response. He simply leaves the scene.

What are we to make of this sudden departure?

Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, the great exegete known as Nachmanides, or Ramban, suggests an answer which both gives us an insight into Moses thought processes and teaches us a lesson about the power of dialogue to overcome obduracy.

He writes: "Moses knew that the recent plague of hail frightened Pharaoh and his people very much. He reasoned that the fear of a deadly famine, which would inevitably result from the plague of locusts, might bring even Pharaoh to soften his heart. And so, without so much as asking Pharaoh for permission to leave, he summarily departed before Pharaoh could say yes or no. He did this to allow Pharaoh and his courtiers to discuss the matter and take counsel from one another. Indeed, this is exactly what happened. The courtiers said to Pharaoh, 'Are you not yet aware that Egypt is lost?' In the words of our rabbis of the Midrash, 'Moses observed that they were turning to each other, taking this threat seriously. So he left abruptly, so that they would indeed advise each other to repent.'"

Ramban readily admits that he was preceded by the rabbis of the Midrash in his insightful interpretation. Despite the fact that Moses had already become quite familiar with Pharaoh's extreme stubbornness, refusing to comply with Moses' demand even after seven devastating plagues, and despite the fact that the Almighty himself had told Moses that Pharaoh's heart would remain hardened, Moses still held out hope that Pharaoh would take the counsel of others, would "talk things over" and might relent. In Moses judgment, repentance is always a possibility, and what makes it possible is conversation and dialogue.

Rabbi Simcha Z. Brodie, a great 20th century *yeshiva* dean whom I was privileged to meet in person, uses this passage in the writings of Ramban as the cornerstone of his theory about the importance of dialogue and of its power to change people. He goes so far as to argue that true spiritual greatness cannot be achieved without such dialogue.

To illustrate this point, he relates a story he heard from one of the disciples of the famed 19th-century moralist, Rabbi Israel Salanter. Rabbi Salanter was once told about a uniquely spiritual individual, one who had attained rare levels of piety. Rabbi Salanter refused to believe that an individual, acting alone, could achieve such an unusual stature. "If you would have told me this about one of the three saintly men from the town of Reisen (three famed early 19th century Pietists), I would believe you. Each of them had the others to help him ascend the ladder of holiness. But the man you just described to me lives in utter solitude. No one can achieve sublime spirituality alone."

Ramban and Rabbi Brodie are teaching us two useful and important lessons, lessons which Moses knew well. First, dialogue and the readiness to talk things over can soften even the hardest of hearts. Secondly, solitude may have its occasional value, but only a life of dialogue with others can foster moral and psychological growth. ■