

Parshat Beshalach

Empathetic Leadership: On Top of the Mountain or Down in the Valley?

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Communication in the 21st century is fast paced and abundant, which presents both opportunities and challenges. The twenty four hour news cycle allows access to events throughout the globe. Social media networks provide opportunities to connect to friends and families around the world. However, it remains a challenge to remain genuinely connected and to formulate meaningful responses to pivotal moments in other people's lives. Our thumbs can send off a donation and an email or phone call can express empathy, but many of us holding our devices feel removed and helpless. Ideally, we would "show up," be present, and share space with those in need, but there are many instances where physical proximity is neither practical nor welcome. How can we maintain genuine empathy from a distance?

A close reading of Rashi's commentary at the end of this week's parsha provides guidance. While Moshe Rabbeinu did not have a smartphone, he finds himself in a similar predicament as Bnei Yisrael fight a war with the nation of Amalek. Moshe observes the battle from a mountain above, but instructs Yehoshua, his future successor, to find able bodied men and to lead the nation in battle. Moshe situates himself on top of a rock, and raises his hands to symbolize the victory of Bnei Yisrael over Amalek.

Moshe remains involved in the war, but also chooses to remove himself from any immediate physical danger. Moshe's hands begin to feel quite heavy, and the Torah describes that Aharon and Chur first provide Moshe with a rock on which to sit, and then support his arms, keeping his limbs steady until the sunset.

Rashi explains that the heaviness in Moshe's hands was a direct result of his removed stance from the war.

“בשביל שנתעצל במצוה ומנה אחר תחתיו, נתייקרו ידיו”

“Since he had been lax in [the performance of] the commandment [of warring against Amalek] and had appointed someone else in his stead, his hands became heavy.”¹

Rashi's next comment, however, praises Moshe for demonstrating his empathy for Bnei Yisrael's pain; instead of sitting on a cushion, according to Rashi, Moshe purposely sits on a rock.

“אמר: ישראל שרויין בצער, אף אני אהיה עמהם בצער”

¹ Rashi Shemot 17:12 “ידי משה כבדים”

“(Moshe) said: Yisrael is in pain, so too I will be with them in (their) pain.”²

Is Moshe at once criticized for not going to war with his people, but in the same breath praised for not sitting on a pillow while his nation was in danger? Moshe's choice of seating seems frivolous compared to the physical dangers of Bnei Yisrael down the mountain!

Rashi's comments reflect Moshe's conflicting emotions. Moshe was over 80 years old, and possibly understood that his presence at this war was more of a liability than an assistance to Bnei Yisrael. Rashi's is quoting a midrash³ that provides an expanded understanding of Moshe's psyche. The midrash explains that Moshe's hands felt heavy because he felt regret:

ידי משה כבדים, מכאן שלא ישהה אדם במצות. אלולי שאמר משה ליהושע בחר לנו אנשים לא היה מצטער... באותה שעה כאדם שתלויין לו שני כדין של מים

“And Moshe's hands felt heavy: (We learn) from here not to delay in performing Mitzvot. Had Moshe not instructed Yehoshua to choose men (for the battle), he would not have felt troubled...At that time Moshe (felt) like he was carrying two pitchers of water.”

Moshe's heavy hands were not a punishment for his distance from the war, but an indicator of his deep regret that he could not carry the nation to victory on his own. Moshe could not have done much more than communicate with God and be a symbol of victory and strength for Bnei Yisrael. As an empathetic leader, however, Moshe felt the burden of the nation's safety physically, despite his own physical distance from the actual danger. Moshe expressed his concern by avoiding comfort, and sat on a rock instead of a cushion.

The haftarah of Beshalach is Shirat Devorah, Devorah's song after leading Bnei Yisrael to victory against Sisera and his army. While Devorah is satisfied with the nation's victory, she also chastises the various tribes who did not participate in the war while their brethren were in danger.⁴ While a bulk of Bnei Yisrael felt immediate danger from their enemies, Devorah describes that the tribes of Reuven and Dan were only worried about their own economic and physical concerns. The period of the Shoftim, the judges, lacked strong leadership, and despite relatively close proximity to one another, each tribe of Israel began to function as its own independent unit, lacking empathy and care for one another.

There are instances where we must be like Yehoshua and his army fighting Amalek, down on the mountain, protecting one another. However, it can be easy to feel like if we can not be with the action, we might as well mind our own business, like the tribes during the time of Devorah. Moshe's actions provide a humbling model of what is possible without immediate proximity. We must continue to look and see, even from atop a mountain, feeling the heaviness in our hands and pain in our hearts.

² Ibid, "אבן ושימו תחתיו"

³ מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל בשלח - מסכתא דעמלק פרשה א

⁴ Shoftim 5:16-18



Atara Lindenbaum, comes to Yeshivat Maharat after completing a Masters in Urban Planning and Policy from Hunter College. Throughout Atara's time at Hunter, she researched and wrote about religious issues in urban areas, such as eruv and issues of school funding. Atara worked as a planning consultant to various towns throughout the Hudson Valley.

Atara spent two years in Jerusalem where she completed the Matan Program for Advanced Bible Studies and studied Jewish Education at the Melton School in Hebrew University. Atara then was fortunate to teach the Matan Bat Mitzvah Program, and to teach Tanach and Jewish History to high school students in both the Maimonides School in Brookline, MA and

Beren Academy in Houston, TX. Atara graduated from Stern College with a BA in History, after learning at both Migdal Oz and Midreshet Lindenbaum. Atara currently lives in Tel Aviv with her husband and three daughters.