

Drash Parashat Shemot – Dec. 25, 2021

Davar Torah by Robbie Fein

Our tradition does not allow us to make eulogies on Shabbat. My father-in-law's 8th Yahrzeit was this week and anyone who knew him will understand that memoirs of him were channeled into me in this Drashah.

Our mentor Dick Israel (z'l) would often quip: "Don't assume ill will when mere incompetence would do as an explanation." I think that's great advice, but what happens when you're absolutely certain that someone acts in a way that is not in keeping with your own values and beliefs? What if the values and beliefs radically differ from your own? And, regardless of our values, do we have an obligation to engage with such a person in some way?

During the pandemic, I've been engaged in a 3-person Chavruta with my brother-in-law and a friend of mine in NY relating to this question.

Our Chavruta has studied many texts that relate to the potential requirement or at least advisability of empathic engagement with the radical other. In Pirkei Avot, we learn that:

Batorah Nikneit b'arbaim ush'moneh d'varim – the Torah is acquired through 48 things or more contextually 48 virtues.

One of them is Nose B'ol im Chavero – carrying a burden with one's fellow. If we look at that concept just by parsing the words, carrying the burden means essentially sharing the burden. To share the burden you must first understand the issue. In the case of the other, this means that you put yourself into the shoes of the other. Had the word existed before the 1850s, the Rabbis essentially would have said: empathize with your fellows and perhaps take compassionate action to relieve their burdens.

Of course, we also must consider who your Chaver – your friend -- is. Maimonides' commentary on the phrase in Pirkei Avot, K'ne L'cha Chaver – acquire for yourself a friend – teaches us that there are three kinds of friends – ranging from the closest relationships of rabbinic colleagues and loved ones to the ohev to'elet – a benefit friendship that is essentially transactional. It is this latter category that allows us to interpret Nose B'ol to mean that we must be empathic with everyone – even the radical other. You don't have to have equality in these relationships, but they apply to everyone. Maimonides based this kind of friendship on his reading of Aristotle who noted that this kind of friendship was essential to the functioning of society because law alone could not assure a good society.

That brings us to today's Parasha – or more specifically Chapter 2 of Shemot, which is essentially the prologue to the Burning Bush story.

One of the texts we learned in our Chavruta is a summary of two Ba'alei Musar – Masters of the the Musar method. This method is a means of developing character traits that prepare you to live a life of Torah. We start with R. Simcha Zissel Ziv and the question of how Moshe merits the status as savior of Israel. He begins with the phrase VaYigdal Moshe – Moshe grew up. Relying on Rashi's interpretation, he says that this means that Moshe grew up for greatness. Pharaoh thus appointed him to oversee his house. And, Simcha Zissel said he had a natural way of being connected to Pharaoh.

Then the Torah tells us that he went out to his brethren and VaYar B'sivlotam – he saw their suffering. Simcha Zissel quotes Rashi: He gave his eyes and heart to be concerned about their plight, meaning that he would always observe by sensory evidence. And, Simcha Zissel concludes that it was if he himself was a bearer of the burden with them physically – the intention of Nosel B'ol in Pirkei Avot.

Simcha Zissel notes that Moshe's empathy extends beyond the protection of his brethren against Egyptians. When he sees two Hebrews fighting, he says Lama takeh reiecha – why do you hit your neighbor? Then in the subsequent dialogue Moshe realized that Hebrews had seen him strike the Egyptian and he fled to Midian. There he rescued the daughters of R'uel – Vaykom Moshe v'yoshian – Moshe rose up and saved them.

We see Moshe saving the Hebrew from the Egyptian taskmaster, Hebrews from one another and the foreigners in Midian. And, he did so by sacrificing his position in Pharaoh's palace. This taxonomy proves to Simcha Zissel that Moshe bore the burden with those he encountered so when Pirkei Avot says bear the burden with your fellow that means everyone.

Let's look at another Musar Master's work, R. Avraham Yaffan who focuses on the phrase in the Torah that says Moshe turned this way and that way. Most commentators say that this means that Moshe wanted to make sure the coast was clear before acting. According to R. Yaffan, Moshe was not trying to protect himself. Instead, he was looking to see if someone else would step up to save the Hebrew. Like God at Sodom and Gemorrah, he was looking for one righteous man. Seeing none, Moshe concluded that he must save the Hebrew at all costs.

R. Yaffan finds justification for his analysis in the Zohar, which says that he was seeing if everyone was just absorbed in their own business or if there is someone worried about the fate of the public. According to Yaffan, God looks for such a person in every generation to sacrifice self and act for others.

Ultimately, Yaffin bases his analysis on this question: When we look at Moshe's actions, would it have been better for Moshe to play the inside game at the palace to seek the welfare of the Hebrews or take the actions he did? Yaffin defends Moshe's course of action in three ways.

- First, don't become like your oppressors. If Moshe had turned his back on the Hebrew, he would have been just like the Egyptians who allowed Pharaoh to commit his acts of genocide.
- Second, failure to challenge the Egyptian would have continued the slave mentality of the Hebrews – so much so that no one would have been willing ... *l'hitarev bamachir koh gadol* (to intervene at such a high price) to save the one Hebrew, let alone the entire people
- Finally, there is an educational message. The Zohar compares Moshe to Gideon in Sefer Shoftim. There Gideon is the military leader who repels the Midianites, but rejects the people's offer to form a monarchic dynasty. Instead, the model of Gideon is that sacrifice is needed for the good of all.

At this point, I have to admit that I've been hiding something from you about Simcha Zissel. That hidden point is that Simcha Zissel glorifies self-sacrifice – so much so that his philosophy is essentially one of self-negation. Yaffin does not require Simcha Zissel's self-negation. He requires both a sense of self and a commitment to all. Yaffin cites the Zohar's notion that praising God requires that all join in -- for there is no holiness without universal commitment to God.

Therefore, we need to commit to empathic engagement without total self-sacrifice.

Let's see if we can explore the practical advantages of empathic engagement. First, empathic engagement can give us the perspective of all. A Chabad parable teaches us that we can learn something from everyone -- even the thief. The Chabad point out that the thief has many traits we can emulate such as cleverness and daring. Similarly, the social theorist (and mentor of Hannah Arendt) Karl Jaspers in *The Question of German Guilt* notes that we learn the most from the people with whom we disagree. And, you can guess by the title of his book that he is talking about the ultimate other. Second, we need to consider what the empathic ethos does for you as a person. Does the practice itself make us better people? Clearly, the Mussar Masters believe that the adoption of ethical practices is in fact the path to holiness.

Are there limits to *Nose B'ol*, however? Clearly, empathic engagement that puts you in harm's way of a violent person is not a requirement. In fact, the Talmud makes clear that the right of self-defense is paramount and that if you are threatened, you are justified as we learn in *Masechet Sanhedrin* to rise up and kill. Then there is the practical issue of publicizing a harmful act. If empathic engagement is manipulated through PR of the radical other, can you justify the engagement?

I suppose there is one final practical question; put simply, can you do it? Can you engage with everyone? Can you engage with the radical other? Personally, I can't imagine myself having the discipline and self-control to engage empathically with members of the Westboro Baptist Church. I look at videos of my brother-in-law's encounters with WBC members and in truth I am in awe of his ability to do so. I recognize, however, that his interviews have produced many important revelations that bring to light issues of abuse of Church members that I'm sure helps to explain their behavior.

There is no specific mitzvah to quantify the principle of Nose B'ol and to identify the situations to which it applies. In our broken world, however, one thing is clear. We can use more of it.

So, in returning to the Parasha as the model for the concept of Nose B'ol, I think that we have to make sure that our approach invokes the guidance of R. Yaffen and not the self-denial of Simcha Zissel. Perhaps the best justification for this is the subsequent actions of Moshe at Mei Miriva in Sefer B'midbar. Did Moshe fail to earn the right to enter the land because he believed that his self-sacrifice warranted a like-kind response from the people? When that did not happen, did he then fail to perform according to God's instructions? Were his subsequent actions the result of too much self-sacrifice?

In that regard, I leave you today with the words of Narkis in her song entitled Moshe performed most famously by Miri Mesika:

In the end we escaped because of you
but you were the last to see the land
that became the floor of our lives
you saw the land from far away
now everything has changed (our) customs, the longing has finally passed
what burned in our hearts remains in you
but with us all freezes, stands in (the) shadow

Maher – Quickly
Atah Tihyeh Lanu Einayim – you will be our eyes
Sheyip'tach Kvar Halev – that will finally open the heart

While Moshe in the Bible comes to express frustration and anger, the song makes an appeal to the heart – to empathy and to compassionate action, to the Moshe of Chapter 2 that we read in today's Parasha. I hope we can all channel that Moshe as much as possible.

Shabbat Shalom