

The Imperative of Sight— A Lesson in Leadership

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At our most recent Leadership Scholars meeting, we were privileged to hear from YU President Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman. During the Q+A at the end, I asked him how Jewish leaders, who are in the public eye and have power and influence upon the Jewish and broader community, should work to retain their humility. He answered by quoting two verses from Parshat Shemot. The first takes place in Egypt, when Moshe sees two men fighting and he tries to intervene. One of them turns to Moshe with a puzzled look and says “

” [Who appointed you to be a master and judge over us?] (2:14). The second

As much as I appreciated Rabbi Berman’s point, I didn’t fully understand how it answered my question. At the end of the day, if you choose to step in to solve a problem, then it is your own initiative that makes the difference, not God’s providence. How can moments like this lead a person to humility?

I would like to spend some time exploring this dialectic pointed out by Rabbi Berman through the lens of the second verse he quoted. A close reading of the verse, with the help of Malbim's commentary, will hopefully shed light on what it means to be a humble leader.

Moshe said to Hashem: “Please Hashem [don’t send me to Pharaoh as the representative of the Jewish People], I am not a man of words, not yesterday and not the day before; rather, I have a heavy mouth and a heavy tongue.” Hashem said to him: “Who gave mouth to humankind? And who made

"deficiency" or a "mistake." If Hashem makes it difficult for a person to speak, it is because Hashem wants it to be difficult for this person to speak, because, for reasons unknown to

Why would Hashem bring up heightened awareness to Moshe at the burning bush. We might suggest it is because heightened awareness is precisely what brought Moshe to the burning bush in the first place!

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(2) An angel of God appeared to [Moshe] in a flame from amidst the bush, and he saw (), and behold the bush was engulfed by fire but was not being consumed. (3) Moshe said "I will turn now and see this great sight. Why isn't the bush being consumed?"

(Shemot 4:2-3)

Obviously, Moshe saw the burning bush. Everyone in his position would have. In a bland and monotonous desert, where the most exciting spectacles are prickly green cacti, it would be near impossible to miss the sight of majestic red and yellow and orange flames. What made Moshe unique was not that he saw the bush, but rather that he chose to turn to investigate. The sight that brought Moshe over to the bush was not the sight of (the verb used in verse 2 to describe Moshe noting the fire's existence), but rather the sight of . Although this verb isn't used explicitly in the verse 3 (the verse in which Moshe decides to approach the

Hashem?" Those moments when Hashem does choose to open your eyes and ears¹ to a problem in the world, therefore, are also intentional. They are not the default. They are Hashem calling out to you, saying, "Hey! You! Ya, you! I am making you aware of this problem because I want you to do something about it. I am calling upon you to be the *ish* in this situation because there are no other *anashim* who are going to take care of this problem otherwise. And I know you have the ability to solve this problem, because otherwise I wouldn't have bothered to go out of my way to make you aware of it. The fact that I am showing you

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, your own strength that allowed you to solve this problem, but rather strength that God gave you, since He wouldn't have otherwise bothered to make you aware of the problem in the first place.

Furthermore, if you notice a problem in a situation and don't see anyone else stepping in to solve it, you should not use this as a justification to remain passive as well. It may be that Hashem chose to make the others around you "blind" or "deaf" to the injustice, as we have seen He sometimes does -- perhaps because they do not have the capabilities to make a difference in this particular scenario or maybe because there are other problems that they are tasked with solving. But He chose to make you "see," and that means you need to do something about it. The same way their lack of sight justifies lack of action, your sight necessitates action. It is not simply "the right thing to do." It is an explicit directive and imperative from God Himself!

Hopefully, this perspective will allow us to live life with greater cognizance of what our eyes see. We all have moments at which we are called upon to be leaders. If you see or hear something that causes an uneasy feeling in your stomach, something that seems wrong or odd or out of place to you, then you can assume it is Hashem who is making you aware of the problem. And you can therefore be confident that Hashem has given you the tools to solve it. Don't be someone who notices something and stands idly by. Be someone who notices something and takes action. -- it is for this purpose that you were created!