



WOMEN'S LEAGUE SHABBAT

Devar Torah on Parashat Va'era

Up until this week's *parasabah*, it is accurate to say that Moses has not been the model of a successful leader – the type who can inspire individuals to work for the greater good of an organization, communicate effectively in an articulate and respectful manner, *and* maintain personal integrity while working toward the ultimate goal.

In all fairness to Moses, he didn't volunteer. He was chosen by God to lead *B'nai Yisrael* – in much the same way that many of us find ourselves at the helm of our sisterhoods – convinced by a well-meaning nominating committee that we can do the job, absolutely! And like Moses, we struggle with the burdens of a new position, feeling ourselves ill-equipped and lacking in key abilities. Moses thought of himself as a poor communicator, inarticulate in his speech, and therefore unable to convince his people that their faith in God would be rewarded. For us, although the task may be less daunting, the implications are still the same – it is not that simple to find a qualified leader or to *be* a qualified leader.

But something significant happens to Moses along the way – a lesson to us all. Moses *becomes* a leader who learns to engage with God, Pharaoh and *b'nai Yisrael* in a skillful, confident and respectful way. How does this change come about? It happens because God becomes Moses' teacher, modeling the behavior of a successful leader. Putting it in contemporary Women's League parlance, Moses becomes a graduate of God's Leadership Institute.

What skills does he acquire? God demonstrates the power of effective speech – focusing on the message more than on the delivery. When God promises redemption through active verbs, “*I will free you... I will deliver you... I will redeem you... I will take you ... and I will bring you into the land*” God creates a kind of installation speech in which He articulately communicates goals for a cynical people. There is no mistaking the ultimate objective – the fulfilled promise of redemption in the land of Israel. Additionally, God teaches Moses (and the people) about the fundamental importance of shared goals as partners in the covenant and the process of redemption.

As God recounts the past actions and genealogies, Moses comes to value history. The past, however, should not necessarily govern the future, since relying too much on the past can be a form of enslavement, tempting us to say, “*We tried it before and it didn’t work.*”

Additionally, God urges Moses to seek the help of his brother Aaron, underscoring the need for a leader to surround himself with as many capable individuals as possible. The stronger the support team, the more able the leader. A support staff with responsibilities of its own reduces stress on the leader, and helps develop future leadership.

Moses’ greatest transformation as leader occurs while watching God unleash the plagues on Egypt. When the Egyptian magicians proclaim God as their source, they recognize and acknowledge God’s power and authority. The “shock and awe” that comes from this display convince Moses and Aaron that deliberate and forceful actions are convincing. While most of us do not have the magical power to turn a wooden staff into a serpent, we can all conjure up some kind of creativity. Today, the common terminology is “thinking outside the box.”

In today’s *parashah*, Moses exemplifies the twin processes of reflection and growth fundamental for aspiring leaders. Although many feel ill-equipped to take on important sisterhood positions, good mentors can help the most reluctant among us. We can coach new leaders through collaborative efforts in sisterhood activities and inspire others to take on new jobs. If we are going to take time to volunteer, we need to feel invested in the process of leadership development and in the future of the organization. And, if we are going to shape our organization’s future, we should aspire to become like the confident Moses we read about at the end of *Parashat Va’era*, not the reluctant Moses we find at its beginning. Shabbat Shalom!

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