



Leadership and the Prayer Community • Parshat Bo

Crisis makes leaders and breaks leaders.

In this week's sedra, *Bo*, the very mention of a locust plague sent Pharaoh and his courtiers into a tailspin. A swarm of locusts is not only unsightly, it can ruin crops for an entire harvest season, decimating an economy and heightening starvation. I learned from a *National Geographic* website, that locusts in the ancient world were both feared and revered. Locusts can travel up to 81 miles in 24 hours and can stay in the air for days at a time. No wonder when Moses and Aaron threatened Pharaoh with a plague of locusts, Pharaoh was initially willing to accommodate their request to go to the desert and worship their God.

So Moses and Aaron were brought back to Pharaoh and he said to them, "Go, worship your God! Who are the ones to go?" Moses replied, "We will all go—regardless of social station, we will go with our sons and daughters, our flocks and herds; for we must observe the Lord's festival" (Ex. 10:8-9).

Moses, who had the upper hand in this negotiation, pushed his luck and asked that everyone be allowed to leave. Pharaoh was having none of it. He permitted only the Israelite leaders to leave.

But he said to them, "God will be with you—the same as I mean to let your dependents go with you! Clearly, you are bent on mischief. No! You gentlemen go and worship God, since that is what you want." And they were expelled from Pharaoh's presence (Ex. 10:10-11).

Nahmanides explains Pharaoh's ire. Moses

asked for too much so he was left with nothing: "Pharaoh's anger was then kindled on account of the sons and daughters, and he said that under no circumstances will he send the little ones, for they take no part in the offerings. Instead, he would send all the adult males because of the feast which Moses mentioned, while the little ones and the women will remain [in Egypt]." If Moses and Aaron led all the Jews out of Egypt, they would have no intention of coming back.

The *Midrash Lekach Tov* on Exodus 10:9 explains Moses' request as an expression of justice: "Just as we all serve you, so must we all serve our God." The Hebrew word for slave is also the word for a worshipper, a servant of God. If Pharaoh had the audacity to enslave children, the elderly and cattle towards his ends, this same group should be allowed the freedom of worship. It seemed only fair.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch on the same verse explains Moses' words: "We have no intermediary, no priests, no representative before our God. If we are to go, we must all go; the tiniest baby in the cradle, the last sheep of our possessions. Each and all are integral parts of our community. None and nothings may remain, for we are all to form a 'circle about God.' God calls us together around Him, and when God calls us, He wants to see us with every member of our family and will all our possessions, about Him."

Moses needed to explain to the head of a spiritually hierarchal Egyptian society that the nature of a

Jewish worshipful community is not based on the intercession of a high priest alone but on the call of a child, the pleas of a young mother, the requests of a farmer, and the petition of an old woman. To deny them the right to pray is to deny them a basic human need. In that communal space filled with the diversity that travels across ages and gender, the Israelites could articulate their pain to God while in the presence of each other.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks captures this beautifully when he describes why we pray in the plural:

Prayer is like a protective wall, and praying together is more powerful and effective.

We do not need superhuman piety – merely enlightened self-interest – to realise that our destinies are interconnected. When we are blessed, we are blessed together. Prayer is community made articulate, when we delete the first-person singular and substitute the first-person plural (“The Priestly Blessings,” *Naso*, Covenant & Conversation).

Moses understood the protective wall that is prayer. Today, as we try to rebuild community post-COVID, we do not always focus on bringing everyone back to our prayer spaces. In some communities, the emphasis is on a minyan of men. In others, attention is paid to youth and not to seniors. We’ve become experts at fragmenting our communities of worship long before COVID. We have teen experiences, beginner’s services, and tot Shabbatot. While these are all important ways we serve different communal needs, we risk doing what Pharaoh wanted and what Moses decried: we limit prayer to one segment of society instead of creating sacred spaces where all have a voice. Because we suffer together, we must celebrate together. Because we share a world, we have to see each other. No one can be invisible. Everyone is integral.

I once asked each member of a group of leaders to write a prayer for his or her leadership. Not one person in the room had ever done such an exercise.

Many neither attended synagogue regularly nor prayed alone with any frequency. The very word ‘prayer’ seemed alien and archaic to some leaders in the room. But as they sat in silence with pens in hand, I watched their faces soften as they wrote diligently. The results were stunning. People asked for wisdom to make good decisions. They asked for patience. They wanted the fortitude to handle difficult situations that required them to stretch and grow. They wanted comfort for the lonelier moments and help when they struggled to delegate. They prayed that when they were done with their work, they would be succeeded by people who could carry on what they built with responsibility and integrity. They prayed for those they led. And they realized, in processing the activity, that when you’re a leader, there is an awful lot to pray for.

As we turn back to our Torah reading, Pharaoh denied Moses’ demand so God told Moses to lift his staff, and with that sweeping gesture, the locusts came on an East wind and covered the land. “Locusts invaded all the land of Egypt and settled within all the territory of Egypt in a thick mass; never before had there been so many, nor will there ever be so many again” (Ex.10:14). I learned something else about locusts. When the rainy season returns, and the earth is moist, locusts reproduce rapidly. They then shift from solitary insects to group behavior—they have greater endurance, and their brain size actually increases.

In Exodus 1:7, when the Israelites grow prodigiously, the term swarming is used. Perhaps Pharaoh saw in this plague of locusts a metaphor for the Israelites themselves: a small but mighty nation who covered the land. They endured and became wiser with time until they posed an actual threat that would only be relieved when they could travel home together as a worshipful community.

So what do you pray for as a leader? What do you hope your leaders pray for? Take a few minutes to formulate your own leadership prayer.