

Shabbat Shalom Fax

Parshat Bo

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Insights into life, personal growth & Torah

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The Fax of Life

ת"וב

January 23, 2021

GOOD MORNING! With the presidential inauguration on January 20th, the country is going to experience a seismic shift in leadership – one that we all must hope and pray will lead to a cohesive union. Unfortunately, right now any cohesion at all would be a vast improvement.

I believe that the value of leadership is often underestimated. This past week, a property manager on one of the school's campuses was bemoaning the culture and behavior of the 21st century young adults – commonly known as millennials.

As a result of COVID, our maintenance and custodial staff was severely depleted to the point that some shifts had no regular staff. The school administrators had been frantically searching for additional staff to handle a special program that was being organized for a large portion of the student body. They had made it very clear to the property manager that he shouldn't expect even the most basic elements of human behavior – such as cleaning up after oneself and throwing trash into the bins – thus leading him to take a dim view of the current generation.

I had an entirely different perspective on the matter. Having taught in a classroom for many years, I knew from experience that the key to getting students to achieve at a very high level was simply to expect it of them. I had learned that if you come to expect more from your students they inevitably come through and justify your faith in them. (This is true of one's children as well.)

I explained to my property manager that if the students don't practice even the most basic elements of proper behavior it's not their fault, it's a failure of leadership. I have to believe that if the students were patiently explained the unique circumstances of the situation that they would come through and take the responsibility upon themselves to maintain a level of cleanliness and organization on campus, to create an environment of which everyone may be proud.

In addition, leadership is almost always about modeling the proper behavior. I remember hearing from one of the school's original students, a brilliant man who also happens to be a world class scholar, the following story about my father.

A very late night of studying in the *beit midrash* (library and study hall) had stretched into the early morning hours and he had fallen asleep on top of the books surrounding him. He woke with a start at about 6 am. Through his bleary eyes he noticed a figure on the other side of the room repeatedly bending down and standing up. As he struggled to focus his eyes he realized it was the *Rosh HaYeshiva* (head of school) picking up all the bits of paper that were strewn on the floor. He told me that experience, seeing the head of the school (my father), taking responsibility for the cleanliness of the *beit midrash* transformed him.

I am reminded of a similar story told about George Washington. One rainy day during the American Revolutionary War, George Washington, on his way to a camp, rode past a group of soldiers who were attempting to raise a wooden beam to a high position. The corporal in charge was shouting orders and also some encouragement, but the soldiers couldn't get the beam in position.

Because he was interested in seeing how the corporal would resolve the situation Washington decided to stop and observe. After watching their lack of success for some time, Washington asked the corporal, "Why don't you join in and help?" To which the corporal looked at George Washington (not knowing who he was) and replied, "Don't you realize that I am the corporal? Have you ever seen a corporal do something like that?" Very politely, General Washington replied, "I beg your pardon, Mr. Corporal, but I did know that you are a corporal."

At that moment, Washington dismounted his horse and went to work with the soldiers to get the oak beam in position. As they finished, General Washington wiped some sweat from his face, looked at the corporal who had continued yelling at them the whole time and said, "If you should need help again, call on Washington, your commander-in-chief, and I will come."

Of course, the Torah isn't merely a collection of stories and laws; it's a blueprint for life. In this week's Torah reading we find a similar message, and we see that Moses truly understood the essence of leadership.

And the children of Israel went and did as God had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did (Exodus 12:28).

The great medieval Biblical commentator Rashi (ad loc) is bothered by the seemingly repetitious conclusion of the verse. The Torah, being the very word of the Almighty, does not contain any extra words nor even an extra letter.

The beginning of the verse clearly states that the Jewish nation did as God commanded Moses and Aaron; so why did the Torah find it necessary to conclude with the words “so they did”? Rashi goes on to explain that the words “so they did” is referring to Moses and Aaron. In other words, they too did the *mitzvah* of the Pascal lamb.

Maharal in his work *Gur Aryeh*, one of the famous commentaries on Rashi, wonders: Why is it presumed that Moses and Aaron would not have had to bring the Pascal lamb that the Torah had to tell us otherwise? In addition, if it was referring to Moses and Aaron, why didn't the Torah explicitly say that Moses and Aaron did it as well?

Very often, when telling our children to do something that we feel will improve their lives greatly (e.g. they should commit to regular Torah study, a proper diet, healthy exercise habits, etc.), they silently wonder why we ourselves are not modeling that very same behavior (and sometimes not so silently).

Of course they don't realize all the obligations that we are under (stress at work, money issues, etc.) or that we have a very hectic work schedule, communal obligations, and personal responsibilities. So how can they possibly understand why we aren't able to make that very same commitment to Torah study and other important life habits?

But, in fact, our kids are actually right.

Certainly, there are myriads of excuses we can make as to why we ourselves don't do what we are asking our children to do, but that's exactly what they are – excuses. Certainly, when one has many responsibilities, there are conflicts that cannot be avoided. But our kids aren't fooled, they know when we are serious about an ideal and when we are merely paying lip service to an ideal. Our kids are a lot sharper than we credit them.

They also know that we have unavoidable conflicts, but they will absolutely judge what we consider to be important in our lives by how we choose to spend our free time.

Leadership follows some of the same rules. Obviously, a leader has many responsibilities and obligations, after all, that is what leadership is all about – taking responsibility to get things done. Yet some leaders see themselves as above others; that they don't have to adhere to the very same laws that everyone else must keep. They “forget” that they too have a responsibility to follow the rules.

The Torah is teaching us a remarkable lesson about what kind of leaders Moses and Aaron were. Undoubtedly, on the night that the Jewish nation left Egypt, there were a multitude of things to do and details to be worked out. Moses and Aaron could easily be forgiven for not personally fulfilling the *mitzvah* of the Pascal lamb.

But they were not that type of leader; they led by example and did exactly what everyone else was supposed to do. They weren't above the law; they had the same obligation as everyone else. That's also what the Torah is teaching us by not mentioning their names (“so they did”): They fulfilled the Pascal lamb like everyone else – as ordinary members of the Jewish people about to leave Egypt. That is what made them exemplary leaders.

TORAH PORTION: Bo, Exodus 10:1 - 13:16

This week we conclude the ten plagues with the plagues of locusts, darkness, and the death of the first-born. The laws of Passover are presented, followed by the commandment to wear *tefillin*, consecrate the first-born animal, and redeem one's first born son. The Torah tells us that, at some time in the future, your son will ask you about these commandments and you will answer: “With a show of power, God brought us out of Egypt, the place of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us leave, God killed all the first-born in Egypt, man and beast alike. I, therefore, offer to God all male first-born (animals) and redeem all the first-born of sons. And it shall be a sign upon your arm, and an ornament between your eyes (*tefillin*), for with a strong hand the Almighty removed us from Egypt” (*Exodus 13:15*).

SHABBAT LIGHTING: *Jerusalem* 4:29 Miami 5:39 Cape Town 7:39 Guatemala 5:38 Hong Kong 5:48 Honolulu 5:57
Jo'Burg 6:45 LA 4:55 London 4:17 Melbourne 8:22 Mexico 6:05 Moscow 4:24 New York 4:43 Singapore 6:59 Toronto 4:57

“QUOTE OF THE WEEK”: A person can be judged by what he does in his free time.

— Rabbi Emmanuel Feldman

Dedicated with Deep Appreciation to
Evan Makovsky



Shabbat Shalom,

Yitzchak Zweig

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

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