

PARSHAT SHELACH
JUNE 1, 2013
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

Dr. Ron Wolfson is Professor of Education at American Jewish University in Los Angeles and a co-Founder of Synagogue 3000. Ron is a master educator and synagogue consultant. He is very interested in making the synagogue a welcoming place for growth and learning in Judaism. Anyone who has heard Ron lecture knows that his infectious smile, his spirit, and his wonderful teachings have a lasting effect on their lives.

Ron has just written a new book entitled *Relational Judaism - Using the Power of Relationships to Transform the Jewish Community*. In his introduction he states: “The vision of Relational Judaism is to strengthen Jewish consciousness and commitment by encouraging individuals to build relationships with Nine Levels of Jewish experience: self, family, friends, Jewish living, community, peoplehood, Israel, world, and G-d.” His book outlines the proper methodology for the leaders of Jewish institutions to attract people and to deepen their relationships with those already in their ranks. To him: “The mission of Relational Judaism is to transform Jewish institutions and organizations seeking to engage Jews and those living with Jews from program-centric to relational communities that offer meaning and purpose, belonging and blessing.”

Throughout the book, Ron spends time on the importance of relationships in our families, in our community and, most of all, in our institutions. He believes that community is based upon these relationships. A welcoming institution creates friendship circles, a caring community, and becomes a place where people want to hang out. Ron suggests that Relational Judaism begins with listening, sharing, doing, and trusting.

Sharing our stories with others suggests we reveal ourselves to others. In these conversations we create a one-on-one, face-to-face encounter with those we seek to engage with Judaism. It is important that we tell our stories, but it is even more important that we are prepared to listen. For Ron, listening requires total attention. When people feel heard, the connection is deepened, the relationship progresses. When people feel ignored or dismissed, there is no chance for relationship.

The next step for a relationship is “doing.” You get to know your closest friends not just by talking with one another, but from sharing experiences which serve as the glue bonding people together. Anyone who has been on a mission knows that in the “doing” one is able to learn a great deal about the people with whom you share the experience.

Finally, he suggests: “It is this notion of trust that is the reward for the investment in building relationships with others. You trust that your dearest family and friends will be with you in good times and be there for you in bad. You trust that the challenges you encounter in life will not be faced alone.”

Ron’s definition of Relational Judaism is a challenge not merely to the institutions of Jewish life, but to each individual’s Jewish life as well. He suggests a number of ways that large

institutions, like our synagogue, can create opportunities for people to get to know one another, feel at home, and become involved with our mission and vision. Since life is based on relationships, he believes, promoting them in a synagogue context is critical for the synagogue of today to grow and remain relevant in the lives of the Jewish community.

In our Torah reading of this morning there is an example where listening, sharing, doing, and trusting form the basis of a story. Our Torah reading recounts how Moses sent twelve scouts to the Land of Canaan to search out what the Israelite people may find when they come into the land that is promised to them by G-d. All twelve see exactly the same thing. However, ten of them suggest that they will never be successful, their mission will fail, and they will not conquer the inhabitants of the land. Only two, Joshua and Caleb, while appreciating the difficulty of their challenge, have enough faith to say that they should move forward for they will be successful in their mission.

Using Ron's guide we can analyze the difference between the two reports. Moses simply asks for the facts when he sends out the twelve scouts. He wants to know what kind of country it is. "Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak, few or many? Is the country in which they dwell good or bad? Are the towns they live in open or fortified? Is the soil rich or poor? Is it wooded or not?" The ten scouts who bring back the majority report aren't just interested in the facts. They have already made up their mind that they will not be successful. They haven't truly listened to what Moses told them. Instead of a factual report they present their opinion which demoralizes the Israelite people and holds the people back from trusting in the mission. As they say: "We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we."

Joshua and Caleb disagree. They, too, listened to Moses' request. They, too, saw the evidence of a strong nation living in the Land of Canaan. However, in contradistinction to the majority report, they suggest that they must go forward: "Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it."

They have listened and are now prepared to move forward. Why? Because they have trust in themselves, in their mission, and in their G-d. The ten scouts couldn't say the same.

I have always wondered what happened as these twelve scouts made their way to the land of Canaan, accomplished their mission, and then sped back to the Israelite encampment. Did they talk to one another? How did they relate to one another? Did they have an opportunity to share their feelings of concern as well as their hopes with one another? Would their reaction have been any different if they were able to talk with one another about the challenges that might have been in their future? Could the fears of the majority have been allayed? We have no record of those discussions or, in fact, if they ever took place.

Ron tells the story in his book of the 100 meter women's relay race team. In the Beijing Olympics they did not win a gold medal and were very disappointed with the outcome of the race. The reason for their loss was their inability to pass the baton from one runner to the next. In the 2012 London summer Olympics they were successful and won the gold medal in the world record time. When asked for the key factor that propelled them to the top of the podium, Carmelita Jeter said: "We trusted each other, we believed in each other. We are a team."

Though I don't have the actual records of what occurred on that journey of the twelve scouts, I think that was their failure. They never really saw themselves as a team. They never trusted one another. They did not rise to the occasion. Not believing in each other, in their mission, and ultimately in their G-d, doomed not only this group but their entire generation, except for Joshua and Caleb, to wandering in the desert for 40 years.

Creating teams of trust, or communities of trust, begins with learning to trust another individual. It means that we must listen to their stories, get to know them as human beings, appreciate their life experiences. Only then will they learn to trust us and we learn to trust them.

A few months ago, a translation into English from an original Spanish book written in 2010 appeared. It is entitled *On Heaven and Earth*. It is a record of a conversation between Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, now Pope Francis I, and my friend and colleague Rabbi Abraham Skorka. The book was written in Spanish in 2010 when the Pope was Archbishop of Buenos Aires. Rabbi Skorka continues as rabbi of a Masorti congregation in Buenos Aires. It was translated into English in 2013.

In his introduction Rabbi Skorka writes, "True dialogue is at the heart of a thinking man's life and demands that each person tries to get to know and understand the person with whom they are conversing... Dialogue requires that each participant become acquainted with the other person... To have a conversation is to bring one's soul nearer to another's in order to reveal and illuminate his or her core. When a dialogue reaches this level of magnitude, one becomes aware of what he or she has in common with the other person."

Think of the people who are part of your caring circle. What do you know about them? What makes them tick? Would you trust them with your life? When we find those individuals, we would do almost anything for them in order to maintain that relationship for we know one misstep and the relationship can be torn asunder. Think of the person to whom you feel the closest – it may be your spouse, partner, mentor, sibling or close friend. What are the attributes that make you feel that you can truly trust them? Can you live up to that same responsibility?

Ron suggests that if we want to establish communities that are strong and vital we need to impress upon the people in our institutions that we must relate to one another as friends, colleagues and caring individuals. Only in that way do we build upon our own experiences to create community and to deepen the Jewish experience in our lives.

I wonder what would have happened if the twelve scouts had taken this message to heart. Perhaps their report would have been a little different. They could have learned to trust one another and their mission. Perhaps if they had followed the pattern suggested by Ron Wolfson they would have come back with a different report, one which would have allowed Moses to lead the children of Israel to the Promised Land.

The lesson that comes from Ron's book in relation to this Torah portion is that in order to be successful in life one must listen, share, do, and trust. I pray that we take the message to heart.