

Shabbat Tetzaveh 5781

Making Room for Others: Moses, G-d, and Disney World

Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom!

Let's begin with a story:

A Nobel-award winning physicist, who was afraid of flying, was on a speaking tour of the nation's top colleges. He travelled by limousine to each destination to give his speech. After two dozen engagements, the physicist and the limousine driver were having dinner before the next speech. The limo driver said that he'd heard the speech enough times, and that even though he didn't understand it, he felt as if he could deliver it word-for-word. So the physicist agreed to trade places and let him give the speech. The physicist sat in the back and wore the limo driver's uniform. The limo driver gave the speech flawlessly, and he opened the floor for questions (typically there were none). However, at this particular university there was one student who thought he was smart enough to spar with the brilliant physicist. The question took a full minute to get out and would require a lengthy explanation and complex calculus to answer. Without batting an eye, the limo driver responded to the student: "Young man, the answer to that question is so easy, I'll just let my limo driver respond!"

In this story, the real limo driver makes room for someone else, the physicist, out of necessity. That's what makes it funny. But in real life, good things happen to us when we make room for others. When we make our own egos and selves smaller, we actually make ourselves greater.

Somebody is missing from this morning's Parsha. Parashat Tetzaveh is a user's guide for Aaron and his sons, the High Priest and ordinary priests: the special clothes they are to wear, and the details of their ritual installation. Moses is crucial to these processes, but his name is nowhere to be found in the entire portion. This is the *only* Torah portion in the last 42 Parshas that never mentions his name. Why?

Perhaps the Torah makes Moses smaller here in order to make more room for his brother Aaron. Recall that the Parsha's theme is Aaron and the priests. And remember what Aaron gives up to allow his brother to shine in the spotlight. For parts of his life, Aaron is merely the limo driver shuttling his brother to deliver the lectures. In Egypt, Moses does the talking while Aaron is there as moral support. Moses's staff famously splits the sea, while Aaron's turns into a snake before Pharaoh. Still pretty impressive, but not on the same level. In the Battle of Amalek, Moses raises his arms to guide Israel

to victory, while Aaron props up his brother's arms. Moses ascends Mt. Sinai to receive the 10 Commandments, while Aaron must remain with everybody below. It's always Aaron who takes the hit: he's the one who stays back to babysit so everyone else can go out and have fun; he's the one who volunteers to take the family picture, which means he's never in the photo.

Throughout his life Aaron makes so, so, so much room for his brother Moses. And Aaron never once complains, never once gets jealous. His sister Miriam does once, but not him. And all this for his *younger* brother! It's so much harder when your younger sibling is the star. Aaron is like the perfect supporting actor in lots of movies who deserves but has never gotten his own with a lead role. Finally he gets his big break: he is the High Priest and his premiere is Parashat Tetzaveh. Moses' name is absent here to mark his pointing the spotlight away from himself and toward Aaron.

Credit to Moses for making room for his brother Aaron, who made so much room for him.

What is true with Tetzaveh today was true with Megillat Esther yesterday and Thursday. Yesterday was Purim, so we read the tale of the Jews' salvation in Shushan. Among other reasons, this scroll is famous for not mentioning G-d's name even once. (Shir Hashirim, Song of Songs, doesn't name the divine either). What is the reason for this? I think it is striking that we read about Moses' missing name the very same week we describe God's absent name. I think that means the same explanation must be true for both phenomena: G-d's name is absent in order to make more room for the Jews to control their own destiny. G-d performs Tzimtzum, a contraction of Oneself, in order to make more room for the Jews to provide for themselves.

Passover represents the ultimate Hollywood-like miracle, like a big-budget movie where G-d saves the day in dramatic fashion. G-d does all the work while Israel passively goes along for the ride. But Purim is the opposite theology. Once again an enemy threatens, but this time the Jews save themselves with Esther's heroics. Which is just how G-d wants it. G-d here is like a parent who wants the college-aged child to show some independence. So G-d creates more room for Israel by taking G-d's name out of the story.

Only when we make room for others, can others step up and truly feel valued as a partner. Of course there are other moments when *we* should step up and take the lead. But today's message is about making room for *others*. Telling someone they are a partner sounds nice, but it is empty talk if a new opportunity to step up does not follow.

I was given such an opportunity by my parents when I was 12 years old. My family was set to visit Disney World that year, and I was checked out before we even boarded the plane. Disney World is for little kids, I insisted, not big kids like me. Yes, this was me at 12. Add this to the long running list of things about which I was 100% wrong. Of course we had a blast, even if Space Mountain was too scary for me - at age 12 and today.

Here was the best part: my parents let *me* plan the trip. They got a guidebook in advance and asked me if I could plan our days at the park. Let me tell you, I read this book front to back and mapped out all the rides we should take, on which days, and in which order based on ride popularity and proximity. Here's a tip: with the most popular rides, like that year's new Tower of Terror, take them first thing in the morning before the lines accumulate.

Throughout those days I held the guidebook and map and led my parents, sister, and grandfather through Disney. I owned it, and it felt amazing. I really felt I was doing something important for my parents and that they trusted me. In today's language, they empowered me. It was a great parenting move on their part to make themselves smaller, by not owning the planning, and make room for me to contribute.

Like Moses in Tetzaveh, G-d in Megillat Esther, and my parents in Orlando, each of us has these opportunities to make room for others, often not our equals. This is true in family life and work life.

Last year I saw a powerful show on Netflix called "Unbelievable," in which two detectives work together to solve a case. One of the detectives is a star veteran, Rasmussen, while the other, Duvall, is a relative rookie trying to make a name for herself. It's the newcomer who really cracks open the case. On the big day, the morning they will apprehend the crook, the star detective Rasmussen demurs and says something came up and she cannot go along. The viewer understands later that Rasmussen wanted the younger detective to have the moment all to herself, to claim the prize she has earned. Given the opportunity, Detective Duvall steps up. But Rasmussen deserves credit for taking herself out of the picture and allowing for Duvall to grow.

While the rest of us are not detectives, we do go to work or school. Research shared in Forbes Magazine by Joseph Folkman shows that leaders who take credit for others' work are deemed to be relatively ineffective by peers. While leaders who try hard to give credit to others are perceived to be more effective. When we try to elevate ourselves by lowering others, we end up lowering ourselves in the process. But when we lift others

up, we elevate ourselves too. As Harry Truman said, "It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit."

Let's give some more credit to Moses, the only person the Torah describes as "humble." The Talmud imagines the following story about Moses:

A prosecuting angel asked G-d, "Where is the Torah?"

Of course we know that G-d gave it to Moses on Sinai,  
but this angel somehow missed that fact.

G-d said, "I gave it to the earth."

The prosecuting angel asked the earth, "Do you have the Torah?" No.

Then he asked the sea, "Do you have the Torah?" No.

The deep blue sea: "Do you?" No.

The prosecuting angel returned to G-d and said,

"I searched the earth but didn't find it!"

G-d answered, "Go to Moses."

The angel went to Moses and said, "Where is the Torah?"

Moses answered, "Who am I that G-d would have given me the Torah?"

G-d jumps into the conversation: "Moses, you're lying!"

Of course I gave you the Torah!"

Moses responds: "Almighty G-d, you have this perfect Torah

you delight in every day. Why should I take credit for it?"

G-d responds: "Since you have made yourself smaller by

diminishing your role, the Torah shall be named after you:

Torat Moshe, the Five Books of Moses."

Moses sees himself not as the owner of the Torah but merely the custodian. The Torah does not belong to him but to the entire world. Moses diminishes his role and makes room for others to take hold of it too. Moses makes himself smaller, which makes him greater.

In Parashat Tetzaveh, Aaron steps up because Moses steps back. Megillat Esther highlights Esther and the Jews taking control of their own future because G-d steps back.

Sometimes stepping back is the best way forward.

Shabbat Shalom!