

Shabbat Nitzavim-Vayelech 5784
Social Ladders Should Be Social Circles
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Shabbat Shalom.

Here's a paradox: the more we move "up" a certain social ladder, the more important people at the perceived "bottom" should become. While middle schoolers may find this extra challenging, I think it does fit what people should aspire to.

I remember when I was in middle school and a camper at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. While there I noticed only a few staff members who appeared to have important jobs: my counselors, Rosh Aidah (unit head), and Director. As a kid, that's who appeared to run camp.

But when I became a bunk counselor at age 18, though, my perspective widened. I realized that a whole army of staff was needed to keep the place running smoothly: doctors in the infirmary, assistants to make photocopies, IT people to fix the computers so staff could program, photographers to snap photos of kids and post on the website, social workers to help deal with kids having challenges. They all filled important roles that I simply couldn't do myself, as just a regular bunk cabin.

I zoomed out fully when I reached the "top" as a Rosh Aidah, unit head, in charge of 70 kids and a staff of 20 bunk counselors. Now I noticed - and depended on - even more staff, who of course had been there all along. There was the kitchen staff who served thousands of meals a day. And there was the maintenance staff who saved the day time and again by fixing toilets, showers, and other things teenagers have a penchant for breaking. Without them, camp would go hungry and fall apart - literally.

I only really saw them - learned their names and said hello - when I had a position of authority. Though I myself was perceived to be a "higher-up," I looked to all these staffers as having supremely important positions as well. Camp simply can't run without people in charge, like the director or Rosh Aidah, or without people doing jobs that are mistakenly seen by some as "less prestigious." In that sense, though not all staff at camp are equally replaceable, all are equally important because each makes a distinct contribution to camp as a whole. My example serves camp, but you can apply this idea to any community or team working together.

Our Torah reading this morning, Nitzavim-VaYelech, reflects this crucial idea as well, that everybody counts. That there really shouldn't be a top or bottom of the social

ladder. We learn that Moses gathers the whole people shortly before entering the Promised Land.

אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים הַיּוֹם כְּלָכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱ-לֹהֵיכֶם רְאִשֵׁיכֶם שְׁבֻטֵיכֶם זְקֵנֵיכֶם וְשֹׁטְרֵיכֶם כָּל אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל:
טַפְּכֶם וְנָשֵׁיכֶם וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּךָ מִחֹטֵב עֹצֵר עַד שֹׂאֵב מִיַּמֶּיךָ:
לְעִבְרְךָ בְּבְרִית ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ

“You stand this day, all of you, before Hashem your G-d - your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer - to enter into the covenant of Hashem your G-d” (Dt. 29:9-11).

“All of you” to enter G-d’s covenant includes some people we would expect, who are few in number and difficult to replace: “the tribal heads, the elders, the officers.” But it’s not just them, and not just the men. All the women are to be present, same as all the kids. All that is well and good. But what’s that about the wood chopper and water drawer?

They have a crucial role in making society work, just like at camp. Who could live without heat or water? Nobody. For a society to function, every role is important, no matter where it is perceived to be on the social ladder. These positions are ranked top to bottom as people might based on prestige, but the passage emphasizes that they *all* enter G-d’s covenant. In G-d’s eyes, they are all equally worthy.

A Hasidic story compares this to a jeweler who had precious diamonds. He once displayed his jewels to an ordinary person and said, “this one here is the best of the best.” The other guy said, “How do you know? They look the same to me.” The jeweler answered, “People who know, know.”

Likewise, some people may look down on those at the perceived bottom, like the wood chopper and water drawer. However, they lack insight into these people’s real contributions. But people who know, know. With the right attitude, we should see in these ordinary people great value and potential.

The Etz Hayim Humash commentary adds: “The whole of the community is greater than the sum of its parts. Each individual Israelite may be flawed and imperfect, but when all of them join together, the strengths and good qualities of each are reinforced and multiplied.”

This is the perfect lesson for us now, with Rosh HaShanah in just a few days. Selichot begins tonight, and these days prompt us to look inward and ask ourselves important questions.

Here is one prompted by the Parsha: In our schools or workplaces, who do we see as “beneath us”? How do we treat them in practice? And how should we treat them in actuality? Because the sign of a strong cabin at camp, as well as any team or society, is how well they treat those who are seen as “at the bottom.” They know that while every group has different roles, every role plays an important part. Strong groups know that the real model to aspire to is not a ladder, with a top and bottom. But actually a circle, with every point equidistant from the center, and every point playing an equal role in creating something whole.

Shabbat Shalom.