



Confusion and Control • Parshat Beshallach

Confusion can be a technique leaders use to maintain control. Confusion can create dependency on leaders because their followers simply do not understand what is expected of them or fail to comprehend the situation they are in. In this scenario, such leaders augment power because followers continue to look up to the leader for explanation and guidance.

Liz Wiseman, author of the book, *Multipliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter*, divides the leadership personality into multipliers and diminishers. Multipliers debate ideas and decisions with those around them. They don't provide easy answers and try, instead, to coax direction out of others and empower them. They challenge others to create an intense atmosphere that helps bring out people's best efforts. Multipliers also hold people accountable as a way to create ownership. They give others the credit and take the blame.

Diminishers are often tyrants or micromanagers who always know better than everyone else. But, as Wiseman discovered, many well-intentioned leaders can become diminishers unintentionally by "thinking too big" and expecting their teams to live up to their grandiose plans and vision without connecting the dots on how to actualize their dreams. Teams can feel disempowered and confused and lose enthusiasm. Diminishers can suffer from brainstorming too much without seeing things through, or involve themselves in every decision, creating dependency. Wiseman brings many examples of such individuals; they often make abrupt and centralized decisions – because

they have the authority to do so – and leave people confused and frustrated.

What diminishers fail to understand is that, psychologically speaking, every one needs to feel some degree of autonomy and control. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in *The Dignity of Difference*, helps us understand what happens when we have little control:

At the core of our culture is the knowledge that too much of what happens to us is beyond our control, the result of economic choices or political decisions taken far away by people we will never meet nor be able to identify. Beyond the narrowing circle of the self lies a world in which we are not the makers but the made. This is the genesis of despair.

In this week's sedra, *Beshallach*, we find yet another example of a diminisher-in-chief: Pharaoh. He was a tyrant who made abrupt, centralized decisions to augment power, ignoring the welfare and safety of his people. He also thought that by exerting control, he could create the kind of confusion that would make the Israelites dependent on him. In a moment of curated magnanimity, Pharaoh finally allowed the Israelites to leave. The plagues were taking their toll. But he never believed they would find their way. As the Israelites were getting to the edge of the Reed Sea, God told Moses exactly what Pharaoh was thinking: "Pharaoh will say of the Israelites, 'They are astray [*nevukhim*] in the land; the wilderness has closed in on them'" (Ex.14:3).

Rashi defines the word “*nevukhim*” as shut out or sunken and brings prooftexts from Job (28:11, 38:16) and Psalms (84:7) that utilize water imagery. This makes sense because the Israelites were about to face a sea they could not cross; all their dreams of freedom would only take them to the bottom of an unforgiving ocean. Rashi continues to describe the confusion: “They are shut up in the wilderness so they don’t know how to get out or where to go.”

R. Abraham ibn Ezra defines “*nevukhim*” as entangled and perplexed and cites his own prooftexts to support his reading. Perhaps the most famous example is in Esther 3:15 when Haman suggested that King Ahasuerus enact a decree to kill one nation among the 127 in his empire; this is yet another example of an abrupt, centralized decision that makes no sense and results in an expected consequence: “The city of Shushan was confused.” Ibn Ezra explains the tension in the word: those who suffer this confusion are “like a person who cannot find anyone to advise him and does not know what to do.”

Rashbam, Rashi’s grandson, cites his grandfather’s explanation and puts us in the heads of the Israelites at that terrifying moment. They were confused by the sea in front of them and a desert filled with scorpions and wild animals behind them. So they set up a camp where God told them to, but had no sense of a pathway forward: “Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-zephon; you shall encamp facing it, by the sea” (Ex. 14:2). God had them face the terror of the future in a state of confusion. Rashbam says that the word “*nevukhim*” describes the hopelessness they felt at having no options. “It describes people faced by insurmountable obstacles to their continued progress.” Confusion like this could have fed straight into Pharaoh’s unchecked power. The Israelites would have to turn back to Egypt and re-enslave themselves under worse conditions or die trying to leave. Their confusion would have fed into Pharaoh’s control.

The people cry out, and Moses tries to quiet them, relying on the technicolor miracles and God’s salvific powers: “But Moses said to the people, ‘Have no fear! Stand by and witness the deliverance which God will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. God will battle for you; you hold your peace!’” (Ex. 14:13-14). All the verbs Moses uses are passive. The people are told to stand, to witness, to observe. God will fight every battle.

God, the ultimate Multiplier, however, has different plans. He empowered Moses and his followers so that they could learn that when facing confusion, they had to take control and charge forward: “Then God said to Moses, ‘Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. And you lift up your rod and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground’” (Ex. 14:15-16). The rest is history.

One of the greatest stories of all time pits a Multiplier against a diminisher. The Multiplier’s victory is a victory for every one of God’s followers. The diminisher’s loss turns into a death warrant for his followers. Every one of us has multiplier and diminisher tendencies in life and in leadership. This week’s Torah reading reminds us to be multipliers and to apply that mindset when we’re stuck, confused and unsure.

So, are you more of a diminisher or more of a multiplier?