



Leadership Stars • Parshat Devarim

Many years ago, I was invited to teach a leadership class in a large tech firm on the topic of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. At some point, one department head commented, “I don’t have to praise people who work for me. I pay them.” The others in the room looked uncomfortable. It wasn’t hard to understand why his department was shrinking.

In this week’s sedra, *Devarim*, Moses praised his people, even as he criticized them. He began his farewell speech to the nation about to enter the land of Israel. He had to prepare them to live without him. Succession is one of the hardest leadership transitions, both for the leaders who are coming and going and for those who have to adapt to new models of governance. Moses was their faithful guide, who freed them from slavery, brought their laws down from Sinai, and escorted them through the desert. All of these formative national experiences were associated with one person.

In his remarks, Moses sandwiched praise of the Israelites with criticism of them. It’s hard to know what we as readers should feel when we read this contradictory summation:

Thereupon I said to you, “I cannot bear the burden of you by myself. Your God has multiplied you until you are today as numerous as the stars in the sky. May God, the God of your ancestors, increase

your numbers a thousandfold, and bless you as promised.

How can I bear unaided the trouble of you, and the burden, and the bickering! (Deut. 1:9-12)

First Moses complained that he could not handle the people. Then he commented that the people were numerous as stars and should be blessed, which was then followed by how difficult the people were; they were argumentative and burdensome. It’s a confusing, inconsistent message. If we take a longer, retrospective view, however, it’s easier to understand the order of these baffling words.

“You are today as numerous as the stars in the sky” in the first chapter of Deuteronomy is a majestic culmination of a vision from the first chapter of Genesis. God blessed Adam and Eve, “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it” (Gen. 1:28). But the blessing was a struggle. Everything having to do with children was difficult. Eve was cursed with pain in childbirth. Her first son killed her second, and she disappeared after the first verse in Genesis 4.

Abraham and Sarah, too, were given national aspirations, but, as a couple, they struggled with infertility and how to make sense of God’s mandate. They tried a variety of options, including adopting Lot as an heir and suggesting Eliezer as a successor. When the first two options did not work

out, God took Abraham outside each time to count that which could not be counted, first the dust of the earth and then the stars in the sky: “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them, so shall your offspring be” (Gen. 15:5). Eventually, Sarah and Abraham had Isaac. Only one grain of earth. Only one star in the sky.

When stuck in a difficult place, with no options before you look above, God advised Abraham. Look far off into a future unseen. Look up rather than ahead. That is what vision is: seeing the impossible, even the improbable, and making it so. God used the image of the twinkling stars set in a dark night to ask Abraham for a little more faith.

The book of Genesis is filled with painful stories of infertility, making it difficult, story after story, to see a nation emerging. But by the time we begin the book of Exodus, the blessing first given to Adam and Eve to propagate and fill the earth had borne fruit: “The Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them” (Ex. 1:7). The aerial view of the stars that sustained our ancestors for generations carried them across the chasm of barrenness. But when they finally experienced a population growth, they were in someone else’s land. Their numbers were a threat and a cause for punishment and oppression.

Only when we arrive in Deuteronomy, on the cusp of a homeland, did Moses note the historic realization of the dream in Genesis 1, the mystery of Genesis 15, and the anguish of Exodus 1. Finally, we became a nation beyond count with autonomy beyond measure. Numerous and free, we shined like Abraham’s stars.

Moses did what leaders must always do. He told the people they had actualized and fulfilled a long-term dream of their ancestors. They achieved a great objective in their history. He named it and celebrated it. He also acknowledged that this growth had consequences for leadership. He was proudly outnumbered. But with growth came other challenges that would need to be addressed by future leaders, like the unwieldy quarrels and

demands of the masses. Moses tried to remind them of the larger, grander picture, but they could only see the mess right in front of them.

Sometimes leaders, when they reach an impasse, need to name the special moments, revel in the milestones, and remind people how far they’ve come and what new challenges they must tackle.

A *Forbes* panel discussion, “How Leaders Can Get More Comfortable Praising Employees,” opens with the observation that many leaders find it easy to make requests but hard to give praise. Instead, these leaders recommend praising often, sincerely, and specifically. As worshippers, we are asked to relate to God first and primarily through praise, not because God needs praise but because we are changed when we name and acknowledge the good in the world that God has created.

A corporate leader interviewed in the article commented that, “Giving praise, when deserved, can help balance out one-sided developmental feedback.” Employees and volunteers need a balance of positive and productive feedback to grow. If giving praise liberally is difficult, one leader suggests that it may be time to do some deep and reflective work about “their own relationship with praise and authenticity and articulate better what the fear is about.” Sometimes when leaders don’t need praise themselves, they forget that others thrive on it.

But Moses did more than praise. He began his farewell by offering the Israelites a lesson in perspective. When what you see on the ground looks problematic and you cannot see a way forward, don’t get stuck. Look up.

When in your leadership did a long-term vision get you through a short-term problem?