

Shemot, 5781

Rabbi Zev Wiener

When Hashem assigns Moshe Rabbeinu to liberate the Jewish people, He is met with staunch resistance, with Moshe immediately questioning, “מי אנכי כי אלך אל פרעה” -- *who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?* In fact, our Sages teach that the exchange at the burning bush lasted a full week, with an incessant give-and-take between Moshe and the Divine, until Moshe finally acquiesced. The Torah indicates that Moshe’s reluctance was not perceived positively by Hashem, ultimately eliciting a measure of Divine wrath with possible subsequent consequences as well (Zevachim 102a).

The question of מי אנכי -- self doubt -- is one which almost every person in this world struggles with at some point or another. *Who am I to go before Pharaoh?* Humans can naturally feel so insignificant, so frail, and so powerless, that the idea of confronting our own unique challenges, whatever they may be, becomes intensely frightening. In perhaps its most extreme form, the question of מי אנכי may lead us to stay in bed all day, afraid of facing the unbearable weight of the world outside. In other instances, we may turn to substance abuse as a desperate yet counterproductive attempt to temporarily drown out the intolerable fears of standing before Pharaoh and failing. Other times, we may exhibit more subtle behaviors, like repeatedly delaying an uncomfortable phone call that we have to make, intimidated by the hardened heart on the other end of the line that we will have to negotiate with.

Even if our self-doubt does not push us to specific behaviors, each of us is likely guilty in one way or another of selling ourselves short. We may grossly underestimate our G-d-given abilities, and thereby fail to recognize the unique mission we have been sent into this world to pursue. And there are few miscalculations more grievous in the eyes of G-d than this. It is specifically when Moshe suggests, “שלח נא ביד תשלח” -- *send someone else to do the mission you have assigned for me*, that Hashem becomes enraged. This chastisement is not merely historic, but a direct message from Hashem to each and every one of us thousands of years later. You are capable of far more than you think, and no one else can do the mission you were sent here to do. No one. “Sending someone else” is simply not an option.

Time and time again, I observe how people are capable of far more than they think. I have observed people bounce back from humiliating and destructive mistakes to begin their lives anew. I have seen people learn to live with things they thought they

could never live with, and overcome illnesses and injuries that they thought could never abate. I have met single parents who carry the challenges of multiple struggling children, while simultaneously working to earn a difficult living, in a way that they could never have imagined being able to do. While we of course must not fall into the pernicious trap of expecting too much and being too hard on ourselves, the encounter at the burning bush reminds us of the equally present danger of underestimation of our own abilities.

In response to Moshe's assertions, Hashem states that Moshe should nonetheless go to Pharaoh, "כי אהיה עמך" -- *because I will be with you*. In this statement, Hashem teaches Moshe and each one of us the key to overcoming our own self-doubt. Hashem is "with you" not just in the sense of being a companion or protector; G-d is "with you" in the sense that your truest, ultimate self -- the soul -- is itself G-dly, an aspect of the Divine Himself. When a person intuits that he or she is unconditionally G-dly, and will remain so no matter how foolish he or she may come across, then the fears of confrontation, disapproval, and humiliation begin to abate. Taking a risk is far less worrisome if I know that I still matter regardless of the outcome. Indeed, the constant awareness of one's Divine essence is the key to unconditional self-worth, which forms the foundation of everything in a person's life.

Just as Hashem encourages Moshe to overcome self-doubt in order to embrace his unique G-d-given mission, we should think long and hard about how to encourage our own children and grandchildren to do the same. While childhood has never been easy, many sociologists believe that levels of anxiety, insecurity, and low self-worth among children and adolescents have increased markedly over the years, even well-prior to the COVID pandemic. There are many possible reasons to account for this finding, each with its own merits. But whatever the explanation, perhaps the greatest gift we can give our children in this current climate is a deep belief in their unconditional G-dliness; that even if they fail, they still matter infinitely, and that they are so much more than what school they get into or what car they end up driving. With this truth, our children will b'eH live with the confidence to stand up against whatever twists and turns life may throw at them, and can merit to bring redemption to themselves and to our people speedily in our times.