

How can I alone carry your contentiousness, your burdens, and your quarrels? (1:12)

Moshe *Rabbeinu* laments the nation's behavior. In describing his leadership, he uses the word, *essa*, carry. This teaches that a leader leads by carrying his flock on his shoulders. They are not a separate entity removed from him, following him wherever he leads them. The leader carries them upon his shoulders. They go where he goes, because he is taking them. Sometimes, the "weight" becomes too heavy. Carrying one on his shoulder is a metaphor for accepting responsibility. A leader does not dole out the blame for something gone wrong on others. The leader steps up to the plate and declares, "It is my fault. I will fix it." Thus, we understand why a leader may have difficulty carrying someone who proves to be too heavy. Too many issues exist for which the leader must accept responsibility. At times, he may feel that these issues are beyond his "pay grade."

Moshe asserted, *Lo uchal levadi s'eis eschem*; "I cannot carry you alone" (ibid 1:10) This is a statement that requires elucidation. To suggest that the man who was the medium through which Hashem facilitated the plagues and miracles that He wrought in Egypt might be overwhelmed with the weight of the Jewish people upon his shoulders is incredible. To believe that the individual who led the nation through the Red Sea after Hashem caused him to split it now had responsibility issues concerning his stewardship of the nation is unacceptable. What does our quintessential leader mean with this statement? Should someone of Moshe's caliber have difficulty judging the nation? *Rashi* explains that Hashem had elevated the nation to such a level of greatness that a judge who erred in *p'sak*, his *halachic* ruling, which resulted in an unjustified loss, was worthy of death. This was an enormous burden of responsibility for Moshe to carry alone.

Another definition for *essa* is based upon its relation to *naso*, lift up (take a census). *Naso es rosh Bnei Gershon*, "Take a census of *Bnei Gershon*" (*Bamidbar* 4:22). The census was executed by counting each person individually, giving attention and distinction to each member of *Klal Yisrael*. This is what is meant by *naso*, elevate/lift them up. Interestingly, in order to raise/lift one up to his shoulders, it is necessary for the individual doing the lifting to bend down and raise the person. "Bending down" is another function of leadership. One who remains ensconced in his high perch, removed from the people, will not be an effective and successful leader.

I feel this insightful secular quote underscores an important imperative that we often ignore. "Eventually, we all have to accept full and total responsibility for our actions, everything that we have done – and have not done." We all have undertakings that we should have acted upon, but did not for a variety of reasons (or excuses). We cannot sweep it under the rug, put on a deaf ear, or close our eyes. Inaction, when one should have acted, is the same as acting at the wrong time. Not doing something right (which could have benefitted others) is not much different than doing something wrong to them. Very often, we assert that we did nothing wrong – just acted passively, rather than proactively. One who ignores an opportunity to grow or help is not only lazy, he is also

self-centered and just not a very nice person. The opportunities that avail “themselves” to us are messages from Hashem: “I want you to take advantage of this opportunity.” Ignoring the opportunity is tantamount to ignoring Hashem’s message.

We egotistically ignore some incidents, or discriminate against them, because it is just not our cup of tea or it does not coincide with our lifestyle or the comfort zone we enjoy. As a result, we allow an opportunity to pass us by. Our excuses are so flimsy that they are shameful. Yet, we convince ourselves that we are making an intelligent, rational decision, when, in fact, we are not. The following story is one to which we all at one time or another can relate. A young, married woman in the process of becoming a *baalas teshuvah*, religious woman, was studying at a seminary that catered to women of similar backgrounds and goals. One day, the woman informed her teacher that she was leaving at the end of the week. It was not as if she disapproved of the seminary and its goals, but she felt that her beliefs did not mesh with those of the seminary. Her teacher asked for an example in which her beliefs and those of the seminary clashed. She replied, “I am pregnant and would like to terminate my pregnancy. I am acutely aware that this action is not consistent with Torah law.”

The teacher asked what prompted her decision. She replied, “I have decided to embark on a career. The pregnancy will be in the way. In order to achieve my goal, I cannot be bogged down with pregnancy and a newborn.” “Does your husband agree with your decision?” the teacher asked. “Wholeheartedly,” she replied. (He probably had to placate his wife and did not want to impair their *shalom bayis*, marital harmony.) When the teacher saw how adamant the woman was in her decision, she understood that she personally had no chance of changing her mind. She attempted a different avenue of discussion.

“Listen, the procedure that you are prepared to undergo is, under the best of circumstances, fraught with danger. (Hashem created us to propagate the world, not to impede its growth. While there are many circumstances, which are beyond the scope of this paper, when *halachah* has dispensations, this woman did not qualify for any of them. She was electively making a decision for herself, which, under the circumstances, meant going against the purpose of Creation. This could prove dangerous. Thus, a *halachic* authority must be consulted.)

The woman agreed to go to *Horav Shlomo Zalmen Auerbach, zl*, who was the preeminent *posek*, *halachic* arbiter. He was a holy man, and this woman conceded that, regardless of the procedure (even if she understood that it was not in accordance with *halachah*), she wanted a blessing that everything would go well.

She walked in to the home of *Rav Shlomo Zalmen* and made her request. “I request a blessing. I am about to terminate my pregnancy, and I would like a blessing before I initiate the procedure,” she said. “Why would you want to terminate your pregnancy?” the holy man asked. “I want to embark on a career and the pregnancy and baby would be a hindrance,” she said. (It is almost mind-boggling that she had no qualms about seeking a blessing for a procedure which did not have

halachic sanction.)

“What type of career do you wish to pursue?” he asked. “I want to become a doctor.” “Why do you specifically want to become a doctor?” “A doctor is devoted to saving lives. This is what I want to do,” she replied. When *Rav Shlomo Zalmen* heard this, he asked, “What is so important about saving lives?”

The question, presented by one of the greatest Torah luminaries, floored her. She began to wonder whether he was listening to what she was saying: “What is important about saving lives? There is nothing more important than saving a life!” Suddenly, it dawned on her that *Rav Shlomo Zalmen* was conveying a message to her: a message that he wanted her to hear concerning herself. Here she was reiterating the importance of human life and entering a career in medicine specifically to save lives; yet, she was prepared to terminate the life of her unborn child. *Rav Shlomo Zalmen* brilliantly manipulated her into self-imparting the message, because he knew that she would not listen to anyone other than herself. She did not terminate her pregnancy, because, after all, saving a life was something she believed in.