

An old man with hearing problems crashed his car into a very expensive automobile. The owner of the expensive automobile jumps out and confronts the old man and says, “Give me \$10,000 cash or I will beat you to a pulp!” The old man replies, “Woah wait buddy, I don’t have that much money but let me call my son, he trains dolphins.” The old man dials his son and as he is about to speak, the owner of the expensive car yanks the phone out of his hand and says, “So you train dolphins? Well your old man just hit and damaged my car, you bring me \$10,000 or I’m gonna beat the heck outta him!” The son answers “Okay, give me 15 minutes and I’ll be there.” In exactly 15 minutes the son pulls up in a Jeep, ten men jump out and beat up the expensive car owner. Meanwhile the son walks over to his father and says, “Dad I train Navy Seals not dolphins.”

Misunderstandings and miscommunications come in many different forms. It’s not always due to a physical hearing problem. Sometimes it’s because of lack of clarity or lack of letting the other party in on our plans or assumptions. We see an unfortunate example of miscommunication in today’s Torah portion.

We read in Exodus 32: “When the people saw that Moses was late in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, ‘Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.’” (v. 1)

Isn’t it curious that the people think that Moses is late? Our Sages felt that this was an interesting detail of the Torah narrative: did Moses and the people agree on a schedule? The Torah does not tell us of such a conversation. How late was he? No dates or times are given.

Our Rabbis teach in Talmud: R. Joshua b. Levi also said: Why is it written: “And when the people saw that Moses delayed [*boshesh*] [to come down from the mount]?” ‘Read not *boshesh*’ [delayed] but *ba’u shesh* [the sixth hour had come]. When Moses ascended on high, he said to Israel, I will return at the end of forty days, at the beginning of the sixth hour. (I.e. noon) At the end of forty days Satan came and confounded the world. Said he to them: ‘Where is your teacher, Moses?’ ‘He has ascended on high,’ they answered him. ‘The sixth [hour] has come,’ said he to them, but they disregarded him. ‘He is dead’ — but they disregarded him. [Thereupon] he showed them a vision of his coffin, and that is when they panicked, and they said to Aaron: ‘for that man Moses...we do not know what has happened to him.’ (Shabbat 89a)

Rashi elaborates: “When Moses ascended the mountain he had told them: ‘At the end of forty days I will return within the first six hours.’ Meaning before noon on the fortieth day. They thought that the day that he ascended is included in the forty days but, actually, he had told them ‘full days’ (meaning forty days, each with its preceding night.) But the day that he ascended, its night was not part of it for he ascended on the 7th of Sivan. Consequently, the actual 40th day was the 17th of Tammuz. On the 16th of Tammuz the Satan came and caused disorder in the world by creating the appearance of darkness, deep gloom and confusion [so as to lead the people] to say: ‘Moses has certainly died’ and therefore the world has been thrown into disorder. The Satan said to them: ‘Moses *has* died, for six hours have already come and he has still not come.’ (As we saw in Talmud.)

So, was this whole thing just a big misunderstanding? If the people had counted the days properly, would there not have been a Golden Calf? Then Moses would not have smashed the first set of tablets—he might have come down the mountain to an eager crowd, presented them with the Law and continued on to the Promised Land. Our whole narrative changes because of a misunderstanding of the schedule!

But perhaps this whole “misunderstanding” is meant to *be* the lesson. The people have this new leader. And even though they have come through a traumatic and community-forming event together, there are still those among the community who don’t trust him, who doubt his commitment to them. They don’t have faith in his leadership. So they cast doubt among the others in the community. They chit chat and gossip, spreading rumours such that the doubts permeate even those who had already signed on to Moses’ leadership. This is the “mixed multitude” that the Torah references in the exodus from Egypt. In Exodus 12:37 and 38 we read, “The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand fighting men on foot, aside from noncombatants.

וְגַם-עָרַב רַב עִלֶּיהָ אֹתָם וַיֵּצְאוּ וּבָקָר מְקֻנָּה כָּבֵד מְאֹד:

Moreover, a mixed multitude went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds.” Who was this mixed multitude? Our commentators tell us they were a mixture of people from different nations, mostly Egyptians who decided to cut their losses and escape with the Israelites. Some of them successfully joined with our community as proselytes. Some of them did not. It was these nay-sayers that spread distrust among the Israelites such that they, too, doubted Moses.

There are always nay-sayers in a community, especially when a new leader comes aboard. This is normal. Folks are on uncertain ground; they don't know if they can trust the new leader. The old ways, even though they may have been unproductive or antiquated, are familiar. It's unsettling to go in a new direction, even if you know it's in the community's best interest.

Maybe Moses (or God through Moses) wasn't clear and explicit enough with the people about the plans going forward. Maybe Moses should have specified exactly what day and what time he would be back. If he had laid out his plan explicitly, maybe the people would have been more patient. But he did not. The expectations were not clear. And what resulted was assumptions and panic.

And then things get worse. Moses goes down to see the commotion. He becomes enraged and shatters the tablets. He doesn't just let them slip accidentally, out of sadness and dejection. No, he is furious. The text says, "he hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain." (32:19) Even a leader as great and as humble as Moses has his moments of anger and frustration. He is human, as are we all. I could imagine him saying, "Seriously, people?! After all we've been through you still need convincing?"

The unclear communication about expectations and plans has led to irrational behaviour on everyone's part. The Israelites build an idol of all things! And Moses, the humblest man on earth, hurls the holy tablets to the ground in unreserved anger. Nobody is operating at their best.

So how do the Israelites go forward from here? They start fresh. Moses and the Levites confront the rebels and then the community can go forward as one.

This is what a community must do. We must keep moving forward, recognising where trust ought to lie, communicating clearly about our plans and expectations, creating a vision of the Promised Land together. When we're feeling uneasy, we must be aware of that feeling rather than acting out in anger or frustration or placing blame. It's okay to worry. It's okay to question. Just like the Israelites, we are creating a vision together of the future and we must remain cohesive to bring it to fruition.

The Israelites and Moses learned this lesson. May we learn from them as well.

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