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By

Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vaera

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"And Moses spoke before God saying: behold, the children of Israel did not listen to me; how then will Pharaoh listen to me..."

Moses brought the children of Israel a tremendous message: God was ready to end their slavery in Egypt; God would bring them to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. After generations of harsh servitude, the Israelites would now become free.

Surely, this long-awaited message should have evoked rejoicing among the Hebrew slaves. Finally, redemption was at hand. Yet, the Torah reports that Moses' appearance on the scene did not generate much enthusiasm among the children of Israel. Indeed, after Moses demanded that Pharaoh release the Israelites so that they might worship God, Pharaoh issued orders causing the condition of the slaves to worsen considerably. The Israelites were furious with Moses; instead of improving their situation, he was causing them even more suffering.

Moses must have spoken to the people, trying to make them understand that the process of freedom would take time and effort. He must have tried to inspire them with the dream of liberation from servitude, of freedom to live in their own land, of the covenant of God with the people of Israel. But the children of Israel were not receptive to this message. They could hardly think of such grand and impractical scenarios. They were slaves who could barely catch their breath from their hard work.

Moses wondered: if the Hebrew slaves themselves don't listen to my words, how can I expect Pharaoh to listen? How can I lead to freedom people who do not aspire to be free? How can I confront the enemies of Israel, when the Israelites themselves lack the united will to go out of Egypt? How can I lead, if no one is ready to follow me?

When Moses related his concerns to God, God commanded Moses and Aaron to let the Israelites and Pharaoh know that Pharaoh must send the Israelites out of Egypt. God did not offer Moses words of encouragement. He did not tell him to spend more time teaching the Israelites about freedom. He told him: do your job, regardless of who will or won't listen to you.

God taught Moses an essential ingredient in proper leadership. When the public faces a difficult situation, a leader needs to present a grand vision of how the public can overcome the difficulty. A leader must keep focused on what needs to be done, and must gain the support and willpower of the public. But this often takes much time and energy. The public is not quickly aroused from its inertia. People always have excuses why things can't change: we are too busy with our work, the establishment is too powerful, we don't want to make things worse by calling for dramatic change, let others take the risk if they want--but don't count on us!

When a leader hears these comments, he/she may lose heart. How can we move forward if the public is not with us? How can we bring about change if people are afraid of change, or if people are not ready to make sacrifices to alter the status quo? The answer: do your job! Keep focused on your ideals and your dreams and your goals regardless of who will or won't listen to you. This is what God taught Moses, and it is a lesson for spiritual leadership of all generations. The public will one day be awakened to the challenges of the moment, and will rise with all its power to effect needed change. Do your job! Stay focused! Articulate the dream! Redemption will come.

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