

PARASHAS MATTOS

We're in the Same Boat

Moses was a patient man. No matter how often his patience was tried - and it was tried quite often indeed - he always responded softly and moderately. Except for one incident toward the very end of his tenure as leader of the Jewish people.

As the people stood poised to cross the Jordan River and begin the conquest of Canaan, the tribes of Reuven and Gad approached Moses and asked to be allowed to settle in the lush grazing lands of Trans-Jordan. Moses instantly responded with a sharp rebuke, "Would you have your brothers go to war while you remain here? Why would you discourage the Jewish people from crossing into the Land that Hashem has given them?"

Such a sharp rebuke, such an unexpected denunciation seems out of character for Moses. Why didn't he deal with them in his customary loving and gentle manner? Furthermore, the Torah expects us to judge others favorably and give them the benefit of the doubt. Why then didn't Moses consider the possibility that they had every intention of joining the battle for the conquest of the Holy Land before returning to settle on the other side of the Jordan River?

The commentators explain that Moses always had extreme consideration for others because he was sensitive to their state of mind. When he saw people sin, he understood that it is difficult to judge without knowing all the particulars of their situations. Perhaps they faced extraordinary temptations that they found impossible to resist. Perhaps there were mitigating circumstances that justified their actions. And so he would always speak to them gently and patiently, drawing them out and showing them the error of their ways.

But what if these sins affected the spiritual well-being of others? In that case, there was no time for gentleness and delicate conversations. Drastic actions needed to be taken right away. And that was exactly what Moses did. When the tribes of Reuven and Gad asked to remain on the other side of the Jordan, Moses was afraid that this request would undermine the morale of the people and cause them to have second thoughts about fighting for the Land. Therefore, Moses immediately chastised them in order to nip any possible sedition in the bud.

A ship was sailing on the high seas when the captain noticed that it was listing to starboard. He quickly sounded the alarm and sent his first mate to investigate.

The first mate went below deck to look for the source of the problem. On the very lowest level, there were a number of fourth class cabins occupied by indigent travelers. He noticed water seeping out under one of the doors.

The first mate yanked the door open and was met by a surge of seawater. In the center of the cabin, a young man was sitting on a chair near a gaping hole in the wall, through which water was pouring in.

“What are you doing?” screamed the first mate.

“I’m hungry,” said the young man. “I decided to make a hole in my cabin and go fishing.”

The first mate’s eyes bulged. “Are you some kind of a madman?”

“What do you mean?” said the young man. “I’m within my rights. I paid for this cabin, and I can do whatever I please.”

“Fool,” said the first mate. “There are hundreds of people on board. Whatever you want to do for yourself, you have no right to endanger them.”

In our own lives, we must always recognize that we are not an island unto ourselves. Everything we say or do affects others, whether they are family, friends or associates in the workplace. A disdainful facial expression, a caustic remark, a sharp criticism, any of these can be devastating. No matter how confident we feel in our judgments, we must always stop to consider the effect on others. Perhaps the damage is simply not worth it.