



B'HAALOT'CHA

Earning Self-Esteem

It was a lesson I learned long ago, when I was a high school classroom teacher. I was new at this line of work and found that my greatest challenge was to find ways to motivate the students. I tried various approaches, which all were basically attempts to motivate by giving. I tried giving special prizes and awards, granting extra privileges, and even resorting to outright bribery in order to get the students to pay attention, do their homework, and learn the subject matter.

It was a wise mentor who taught me that you can't motivate students by giving to them. Rather, you must find ways to encourage them to give to others. The student who gives to others feels important, and it is the consequent sense of self-esteem which is the most powerful motivator of all.

I'll never forget the first time I tried that strategy. I approached the most recalcitrant student in the entire class. He happened to be a very bright young man, who was, in

today's terminology, "totally turned off" to his studies.

I asked him to assist two weaker students with their daily assignment. I caught him completely off guard, so that his reaction was one of utter surprise.

"Who, me?" he exclaimed. "Why should I help those two dunces? If they can't figure it out for themselves, let them flunk."

Although I was convinced that any appeal to his sense of altruism would be futile, I nevertheless gave it a try. I told him that for a society to function successfully the haves must help the have-nots, the strong must aid the weak, and those who are blessed with talent must share their gifts with those who were less fortunate.

It was the phrase "blessed with talent" that did the trick, for he responded, "Do you really think I'm blessed with talent? I guess you're right. I am a talented dude, and I'm going to try to teach those block-heads a thing or two. But if I don't succeed, it won't be my fault!"

He did succeed, and very dramatically. And he recognized that if he was to succeed again at this tutorial task, he would have to be even better prepared next time. He went home that night and studied hard and was indeed even more

successful with his two "blockheads" the next day.

I won't go on to provide the details of my strategy of applying this technique to the rest of the class. Instead I want to demonstrate that this secret of human motivation is implicit in a brief passage in this week's Torah portion, B'ha'alot'cha. In this parsha, the Torah devotes all of the tenth chapter of Bamidbar to a detailed description of the sequence in which the tribes marched through the desert. About two thirds of the way into this chapter, we unexpectedly encounter the following conversational interlude:

And Moshe said to Chovav, son of Reu'el the Midianite, Moshe's father-in-law, "We are setting out for the place of which the Lord has said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will be generous with you; for the Lord has promised to be generous to Israel."

"'I will not go', he replied to him, 'but will return to my native land.'"

"He said, 'Please do not leave us, inasmuch as you know where we should camp in the wilderness and can be our guide [literally read as "eyes"]. So if you come with us, we will extend to you the same bounty that the Lord grants us.'" (Bamidbar 10:29-32)

That ends the dialogue, and we are

never explicitly told whether or not Moshe's second attempt at persuasion convinced Chovav to accompany the Children of Israel. His first attempt, promising to be generous to him, was rejected emphatically by Chovav with a resounding, "I will not go!"

What did Moshe change in his second attempt? Quite simply, he told Chovav that he would not be merely the passive recipient of another's generosity. Rather, Moshe assured Chovav that he had expertise which was indispensable to the Jewish people. He could give them the guidance through the wilderness that they desperately required. He would not just be a taker, but a giver as well.

In short, Moshe was appealing to Chovav's sense of self-esteem. He was saying to him, "You are an important person. Your talents are needed. You are an actor with a part to play in this drama."

What I was doing, as a fledgling teacher so many years ago, to that turned-off student, was essentially precisely what Moshe was trying to do with Chovav in his second attempt to convince him to accompany the Children of Israel upon their journey through the desert.

When reading the text, one can easily assume that Moshe learned a great lesson which caused him to

abandon the strategy of promising to be generous. Instead, he adopted an entirely different strategy, one which conveyed the message to Chovav that he would not merely be a consumer of favors. Rather, he would earn the Lord's generosity because of the valuable contribution that he would make, and that only he could make.

There is a lesson here not just for teachers and students, or leaders and followers. There is a lesson here for all of us in dealing with other human beings. We must be sensitive to their needs for self-esteem. We must recognize their talents and what they can bring to bear upon whatever task lies at hand. When a person is convinced of his or her own importance and value, he or she will be motivated and will act accordingly.

Understanding the dialogue between Moshe and Chovav in this manner allows us to readily accept the conclusion of our Sages. They filled in the "rest of the story" and assured us that Chovav was finally convinced by Moshe's second argument and did indeed join his fate and those of his descendants to the destiny of the Jewish people. 