



## The Power of Saying “I Don’t Know”

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It was not long after my daughter Hadar began to ask questions about every day things that she brought me to my existential knees in the following exchange:

**Hadar:** What time is it?

**Me:** Two o'clock.

**Hadar:** Why?

**Me:** (long pause while I struggled for an answer) I don't know.

When Hadar began to ask questions about things I had taken for granted, my desire to give her an honest answer left me speechless. I did come back to her later on and share that it was two o'clock because our society has agreed to abide by a system for measuring time, and that our communally agreed upon standard of time was measured by clocks. She did not appreciate my answer. Then again, she was three, and it was a little over her head. That said, it is conversations with my children that remind me never to shy away from the answer “I don't know.” Admitting that my knowledge has limits reminds my children and me that we are all human with finite knowledge and that the desire to learn is a life long pursuit. Also, saying “I don't know” creates the desire to pursue the answer together, which helps to create a community invested in learning.

In this week's Torah portion, B'ha'alotkha, we find a narrative fragment that gives us insight into the power of saying “I don't know” as well as insight into the character of Moses, who is a model community builder (at least some of the time).

Before the first anniversary of the Exodus from Egypt, Moses tells the people that they must observe the festival of Pesach as a community to remember their experience of leaving Egypt together:

The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, on the first new moon of the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, saying: Let the Israelite people offer the Passover sacrifice at its set time: you shall offer it on the fourteenth day of this month, at twilight, at its set time; you shall offer it in accordance with all its rules and rites.

Moses instructed the Israelites to offer the Passover sacrifice; and they offered the Passover sacrifice in the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight, in the wilderness of Sinai. Just as the Lord had commanded Moses, so the Israelites did. (Bamidbar 9:1-5)

At first glance, you would think that the *entire* nation of Israel celebrates their first Pesach as a free nation. Every single man, woman and child came together to celebrate his or her communal freedom from slavery. Then the Torah goes back in time to the eve before that first Pesach to show us some people who were excluded from the celebration:

But there were some people who were unclean (ritually impure) by reason of a corpse and could not offer the Passover sacrifice on that day. Appearing that same day before Moses and Aaron, those men said to them, "Unclean though we are by reason of a corpse, why must we be debarred from presenting the Lord's offering at its set time with the rest of the Israelites?" Moses said to them, "Stand by, and let me hear what instructions the Lord gives about you." (Bamidbar 9:6-8)

Because some people had contact with a dead body, perhaps because they were involved in someone's burial, or had been caring for someone ill and they died, they had become *tamei* (ritually impure) and were then unable to approach the Mishkan, which requires that those who approach be *tahor* (ritually pure). Whatever their reason might have been for becoming ritually impure, let's assume it was for a good reason. However, as Oscar Wilde is reported to have first said: no good deed goes unpunished. Through the observance of a mitzvah (caring for the ill or showing respect for the dead), these people are barred from the first celebration of their national and personal freedom. These ritually impure Israelites feel distanced both from God and from their people, who were about to celebrate without them. As it is today, celebrating Pesach is an affirmation that one is part of the Jewish people, who were taken out of slavery by God.

These people come to Moses and Aaron right before the Pesach offering is about to be offered. Imagine watching everyone around you making the Pesach offering, while you stand by excluded from what is going on around you. Feeling this frustration, they go to Moses to see what he can do.

Moses uses this moment as an opportunity to build community. Moses knows the answer to the question is yes: they cannot bring the Pesach offering because they are ritually impure. To tell them this would have increased their distance from God, Moses and the people. Moses could have told them, "Ritually impure, huh? Too bad. Try again next year." But he did not. He listened to their situation, and showed his humility and compassion for these individuals who were excluded on the eve of the first Pesach. The Torah does not report this but essentially, he pretends that he does not know the answer to their question. Instead, he expresses his confidence that God will respond to this situation with a new response.

Moses' openness to a new possible answer to this situation reflects his greatness as a community builder. It is often said that it is easy for a rabbi to always give a strict ruling on a matter, but a great rabbi is able to give lenient answers (when the law permits it). Had Moses been strict with his ruling on the matter, he could have destroyed a piece of his own community. Instead, Moses turns to God, and hopes for a lenient answer that will bring these people back into the fold. And God delivers on Moses' hope:

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelite people, saying: When any of you or of your posterity who are defiled by a corpse or are on a long journey would offer a Passover sacrifice to the Lord, they shall offer it in the

second month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight. They shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, and they shall not leave any of it over until morning. They shall not break a bone of it. They shall offer it in strict accord with the law of the Passover sacrifice...(Bamidbar 9:9-12)

For this offering alone, God announces a new ruling that they have a second chance to celebrate their personal and national freedom. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of Iyyar, those who could not offer the Pesach offering have a second chance. There is no other type of time-bound offering where there is a second chance, but then again there is no other offering so tied up with defining who is in the Israelite community as the Pesach offering. But this is not a blanket permit to skip Pesach and make it up later. You need a legitimate excuse for not celebrating with the nation. You can't treat your national identity casually and then expect to get a second chance later. Moses' "I don't know" both affirms that those who had a legitimate reason for not offering the Pesach offering be given the chance to affirm their national identity, and those who don't take it seriously get no second chances. Moses strengthens the community by saying "I don't know."

The next time someone asks you a question, and you don't know the answer (or even if you do know the answer), you can say, "I don't know. Let's go look it up and learn about this together." When you do that, you, like Moses, are building community.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Rabbi Pepperstone

#### **AS A FAMILY:**

- Talk to you kids about Moses as a model of a good leader.
  - What qualities make the best kind of leader?
  - When and how do you act like a leader?
  - Is it harder to be a leader or a follower?

#### **TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION [B'HA'ALOTKHA](#), ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:**

- God told Moses to gather the entire congregation of Israelites to lay their hands upon the Levites. What did this represent?
- At what age did the Levites begin to perform their service in the Tent of Meeting?
- At what age did they stop serving? And what were they to do after this age?
- What was the rule for strangers living amongst the people of Israel at the time of Passover?
- How did the people know when God wanted them to travel and when to stop?
- When the people were to be called together, how many silver trumpets were blown and by whom?
- Which two families carried the tabernacle when it was moved?
- When it became apparent that the complaints of the people were too much for Moses to handle alone, how many elders did God tell him to gather to judge with him?

- Some of the people lusted after the "good life of Egypt", especially what? How did God satisfy this desire, and what was God's attitude about it?
- What was Miriam's punishment for gossiping about Moses to Aaron? How long was she punished for?