Team-Building

Vayakhel - 22 February 2014 / 22 Adar Rishon 5774

How do you remotivate a demoralized people? How do you put the pieces of a broken nation back together again? That was the challenge faced by Moses in this week's parsha.

The key word here is *vayakhel*, "Moses gathered." *Kehillah* means community. A *kehillah* or *kahal* is a group of people assembled for a given purpose. That purpose can be positive or negative, constructive or destructive. The same word that appears at the beginning of this week's parsha as the beginning of the solution, appeared in last week's parsha as the start of the problem: "When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered [*vayikahel*] around Aaron and said, 'Make us a god to lead us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.'"

The difference between the two kinds of *kehillah* is that one results in order, the other in chaos. Coming down the mountain to see the golden calf, we read that "Moses saw that the people were *running wild* and that Aaron had *let them get out of control* and so become a laughingstock to their enemies." The verb פרע, like the similar פרא, means "loose, unbridled, unrestrained."

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There is an assembly that is disciplined, task-oriented and purposeful. And there is an assembly that is a mob. It has a will of its own. People in crowds lose their sense of self-restraint. They get carried along in a wave of emotion. Normal deliberative thought-processes become bypassed by the more primitive feelings or the group. There is, as neuroscientists put it, an "amygdala hijack." Passions run wild.

There have been famous studies of this: Charles Mackay's *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (1841), Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd: a study of the popular mind* (1895), and Wilfred Trotter's *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War* (1914). One of the most haunting works on the subject is Jewish Nobel prize-winner Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power* (1960, English translation 1962).

Vayakhel is Moses' response to the wild abandon of the crowd that gathered around Aaron and made the golden calf. He does something fascinating. He does not oppose the people,

as he did initially when he saw the golden calf. Instead, he uses the same motivation that drove them in the first place. They wanted to create something that would be a sign that God was among them: not on the heights of a mountain but in the midst of the camp. He appeals to the same sense of generosity that made them offer up their gold ornaments. The difference is that they are now acting in accordance with God's command, not their own spontaneous feelings.

He asks the Israelites to make voluntary contributions to the construction of the Tabernacle, the Sanctuary, the Mikdash. They do so with such generosity that Moses has to order them to stop. *If you want to bond human beings so that they act for the common good, get them to build something together*. Get them to undertake a task that they can only achieve together, that none can do alone.

> **"If you want to bond human beings so that they act for the common good, get them to build something together."**

The power of this principle was demonstrated in a famous social-scientific research exercise carried out in 1954 by Muzafer Sherif and others from the University of Oklahoma, known as the Robbers' Cave experiment. Sherif wanted to understand the dynamics of group conflict and prejudice. To do so, he and his fellow researchers selected a group of 22 white, eleven-year-old boys, none of whom had met one another before. They were taken to a remote summer camp in Robbers Cave State Park, Oklahoma. They were randomly allocated into two groups.

Initially neither group knew of the existence of the other. They were staying in cabins far apart. The first week was dedicated to team-building. The boys hiked and swam together. Each group chose a name for itself – they became The Eagles and the Rattlers. They stencilled the names on their shirts and flags.

Then, for four days they were introduced to one another through a series of competitions. There were trophies, medals and prizes for the winners, and nothing for the losers. Almost immediately there was tension between them: name-calling, teasing, and derogatory songs. It got worse. Each burned the other's flag and raided their cabins. They objected to eating together with the others in the same dining hall.

Stage 3 was called the 'integration phase'. Meetings were arranged. The two groups watched films together. They lit Fourth-of-July firecrackers together. The hope was that these face-to-face encounters would lessen tensions and lead to reconciliation. They didn't. Several broke up with the children throwing food at one another.

In stage 4, the researchers arranged situations in which a problem arose that threatened both groups simultaneously. The first was a blockage in the supply of drinking water to the camp. The two groups identified the problem separately and gathered at the point where the blockage had occurred. They worked together to remove it, and celebrated together when they succeeded.

In another, both groups voted to watch some films. The researchers explained that the films would cost money to hire, and there was not enough in camp funds to do so. Both groups agreed to contribute an equal share to the cost. In a third, the coach on which they were travelling stalled, and the boys had to work together to push it. By the time the trials were over, the boys had stopped having negative images of the other side. On the final bus ride home, the members of one team used their prize money to buy drinks for everyone.

Similar outcomes have emerged from other studies. The conclusion is revolutionary. You can turn even hostile factions into a single cohesive group so long as they are faced with a shared challenge that all can achieve together but none can do alone.

Rabbi Norman Lamm, former President of Yeshiva University, once remarked that he knew of only one joke in the Mishnah, the statement that "Scholars increase peace in the world" (Berakhot 64a). Rabbis are known for their disagreements. How then can they be said to increase peace in the world?

I suggest that the passage is not a joke but a precisely calibrated truth. To understand it we must read the continuation: "Scholars increase peace in the world as it is said, 'All your children shall be learned of the Lord and great will be the peace of your children' (Isaiah 54: 13). Read not 'your children' but 'your builders.'" When scholars become builders they create peace. If you seek to create a community out of strongly individualistic people, you have to turn them into builders. That is what Moses did in Vayakhel.

Team-building, even after a disaster like the golden calf, is neither a mystery nor a miracle. It is done by setting the group a task, one that speaks to their passions and one no subsection of the group can achieve alone. It must be constructive. Every member of the group must be able to make a unique contribution and then feel that it has been valued. Each must be able to say, with pride: I helped make this.

"If you want to build a team, create a team that builds."

That is what Moses understood and did. He knew that if you want to build a team, create a team that builds.

[signature: Jonathan Sacks]