

A D'var Torah by Rabbi Dan Liben for the Torah portion *Shemot*

Parshat Shemot invites us to ask the question, "What makes a good leader? More specifically, what was it about Moses that made him suitable for the daunting role of leadership that was thrust upon him? The *Parsha* recounts three events in his life, before his encounter with God at the Burning Bush, that are meant to tell us something about his character:

1. Moses intervenes when he sees a task master beating an Israelite slave.
2. Later, he intervenes when he sees two Israelites fighting between themselves.
3. Finally, he intervenes on behalf of the Midianite shepherdesses who are being bullied by shepherds at a well.

The Bible commentator Nechama Leibovitz points towards an interesting progression here. It is clear why Moses stood up to protect the Hebrew slave. As a Hebrew himself (albeit one living as an Egyptian prince), he identified with the victim, and felt compelled to stop the injustice.

In the second case, however, the fight was between two Israelites. He could reasonably have walked away, rationalizing that the fight was "none of his business." Yet, he chooses to intervene.

Finally, the incident at the well involved no Hebrews, only Midianites. A stranger with no skin in the game, a person of lesser moral courage might have ignored the scene. But, once again, Moses inserts himself into the situation. The Torah's message here is clear: There is no limit to our responsibility for the well being of others; no room for rationalizing away what we see in front of us.

But what is it that we see? Why do some people seem to just not notice the needs of others all around us, while others, like Moses, take quite a bit upon their shoulders without hesitation?

One way of answering that question is to take a closer look at what happens at the Burning Bush: It is not so unusual for a bush to burn in the desert. What is unusual is to notice it long enough, as Moses did, to see that it was not being consumed. Moses' actions in life stem from his capacity to notice, to mindfully be with what is as it unfolds, and to keep his heart, as well as his eyes, wide open. May we learn this Torah of sight from Moshe Rabeynu! Shabbat Shalom.