D’var Torah for UJA-Federation of New York Closing Board Meeting June 11, 2020

Rabbi Lester Bronstein; *Par’shat B’ha’a lot’cha*

Today marks the completion for several of us of our sixth and last one-year term on the UJA-Federation of New York Board of Trustees. Twice before today I’ve been given the honor of delivering the d’var torah to this beloved gathering. Those offerings would not necessarily be memorable to any of you; but to me they were important opportunities to “give back” to an organization that gives its volunteers more than it gets. UJA-Federation raises serious money, and it allots that money in bold ways that change countless lives. We board members are privileged to help decide where those resources go, and to vote to direct those resources to where they will do the most good. Moreover, we are given a front-row seat to the work of our tireless and ingenious professional staff, whom I personally hold on the highest pedestal. So on this day of closure for those of us rotating off the board, we thank you, UJA-Federation of New York, for allowing us to serve, and to play a small role in doing a large amount of great good.

Our Torah portion for the week, *B’ha’a lot’cha*, invites us to comment on its opening verses filled with hopeful imagery. *B’ha’a lot’cha et hanerot el mul p’nai ham’norah, ya’iru.* “When you get up on the ladder to light the menorah each night, let it shine,” as if the entire Jewish enterprise could be encapsulated in this beautifully symbolic gesture. *Rise up, hold up the torch, light the lamp, let it shine forth. Repeat. Night after night, throughout your generations*. A light to the nations. Inspiring. *Ya’iru!* Let it shine!

But I want to take us to the middle and end of the parashah, to what has to be the most deflating, hopeless, depressing scene in all of the Torah, short of the Golden Calf. To read it, one hears echoes of our own time: disheartened and disenfranchised individuals crying out to be heard; plagues confounding physical well-being; leaders’ credibility questioned; leaders’ patience tested to the core. Confusion and disorientation. No clear pathway toward the future. Uncharted wilderness.

I want to point out three touchstones offered to us by this challenging narrative: 1) *listening attentively; 2) sharing the burden; and 3) leading with humility*. All hallmarks of our UJA officers, volunteers and professionals up and down the ladder, especially in these last months, but also throughout the years leading up to this moment.

The time had come for the people to leave the nurturing shadow of Mount Sinai and to begin the trek through the unknown. They panic. They murmur. They long for the garlic, leeks, melons, and onions of Egypt. They fear whatever might be expected of them. They rebel against Moses, against God, against the entire enterprise. *Vayitz’ak ha’am el Moshe*. “They scream at Moses” and against his authority. They are rudderless.

Listen to the Torah’s response: *vayishma Moshe et ha’am bocheh.* “Moses listens to the people crying as they stand at the entrance of their tents, family by family.” *Vayichar af ado-*nai. God is angered to see the expedition coming unraveled, but Moses, closer to the ground, sees and hears. *Uv’eyney Moshe ra’.* “Moses sees how bad things have gotten.” Moses hears, and sees, and he gets it.

Moses turns to God, pleading for assistance, pointing out that he alone can no longer bear this heavy burden of the people’s needs and fears. He even begs for death as an alternative to going on in this way.

God’s response is to summon seventy elders, people of both administrative and spiritual experience, from throughout the Israelite camp. God breathes into them an ability to share authority, inspiration, and decision-making with Moses and with one another. God saves Moses’s life *and* the lives of the people of Israel by showing them how to include the talents and efforts of a broad swath of the community in the effort to rescue them from ruination. God shows Moses how to form partnerships. The challenges continue; mistrust persists; more horrors await; no one is truly happy. But the worst may be over for the time being, and a modicum of calm slowly returns.

Soon after, Moses’s siblings Aaron and Miriam lose patience, as is normal under the strain of the times. They crack. They lash out at their brother. They challenge his authority. Miriam contracts *tzara’at*, a horrible skin disorder. Moses could have responded with “hah, you deserved it!” Instead, he prays for her recovery. *Eil na r’fa na la.* “Please, good God, do heal her.” God notes that Moses is the humblest, most faithful person alive. The crisis is averted, largely because Moses has responded not with vengeance but with generosity, with humility. Not self-effacement, but not self-righteousness either.

As for us, the only way through horrific crises like those of our own time is to practice attentive listening to the cries of others; to share the burden of attending to the enormity of suffering; and to do so in a way that acknowledges our own imperfections and frailties.

News flash: Good times are not around the bend. There will be more challenges to meet, more uncharted wildernesses to traverse. We need to hear each other, help each other, and know our inner selves.

We can do all of that. The Torah shows us how. *That* is the lamp that it wants us to rise up and light in the darkness of our time.