Stepping Back, Stepping Forward –
Based on a Dvar Torah by Adam Greenwald

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, taught that God's most powerful influence comes not through acting in the world, but rather through conscious and deliberate refraining from acting. He beautifully illustrates this concept with reference to one of life's quieter, but no less amazing, miracles: teaching a child to take his first steps.

About the time that a small child begins to stand on his own, a caring parent will lean down and beckon, "Come to me." The child will take a tentative, wobbly step towards his smiling mother. And then, she will do something profoundly frustrating: She will back away, creating more distance for the child to traverse.

At first there is confusion, even anger, on the face of the toddler. But, eventually, the distance coaxes him to one more step, and then another. As the mother makes space, the child

learns to walk. It is by pulling back, not swooping in, the Baal Shem Tov taught, that God and we create new realities.

This week's parsha, Tetzaveh, is a study in stepping back and leaving space for something new to emerge. As I mentioned earlier, Tetzavah is the only parsha of the latter four books of the Torah that doesn't mention Moses. The parsha it has been noted defies expectations with the conspicuous absence of THE central human character in the Torah. In step back, removing Moses for a moment (or a parasha) Torah is inviting us to lean in and listen more closely, to step into the seemingly empty space to discover new and exciting possibilities.

Parashat Tetzavah describes the ordination ritual for Aaron and his sons to the priesthood, the process of bringing human beings into the direct service of God. There can only be one Moses; but, over the course of Jewish history, hundreds of priests would be ordained to carry out their sacred tasks and

after the destruction of the Temple, thousands more rabbis would carry on the chain of ordination.

During this brief moment in which Moses steps aside, we learn a lesson a lesson as if not more important than that of the Balm Shem Tov about stepping back. We learnt that there are other ways to step forward other ways to enter into the service of the Holy One aside from being called as a prophet. In Moses' absence we are invited to re-imagine our own role in the Jewish story, to envision ourselves as potential leaders and vessels of holiness. Not everyone can be Moses, in fact it's not even the Jewish objective. But everyone can be of service; everyone has something to contribute everyone can help.

When I was considering becoming a rabbi; I was about 17 years old and I went to my rabbi, Rabbi Gerry Raskin (z'l) and told him of my dreams. I confessed to him however one reservation, I explained that throughout the Torah the prophets, who were in my mind the model for modern day rabbis heard a calling from

G-d. I had heard similar things from people that went on to be priests and ministers in Christianity. I told Rabbi Raskin, that I wasn't sure I could be a rabbi, as much as I felt like I would enjoy the role and might even have something to contribute to it because I didn't feel called from G-d to do it.

Rabbi Raskin hardly missed a beat in his answer, there was no longer rabbinic pause, he didn't have to pull a book down from his shelf and look something up (the internet was not invented yet). Instead he responded very reassuringly and without hesitation that in his experience that was not how it works with rabbis. He said, that the rabbis he knew and admired did not hear a calling from G-d to do this sacred work, but rather a calling from the community to be of service.

The detailed descriptions of the priesthood in the Torah give us insight into the hierarchical society of our ancient ancestors. While there were groups assigned distinct tasks, i.e., the Kohanim and the Levites. One lesson from these examples is

that each of us must find our appointed task, our way of being of service in the continuing chain of Jewish life.

Theologian Albert Schweitzer in an interview late in his life taught, "I do not know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: The only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."

By taking a step back, Moses and God invite us to take a step forward and discover our own capacity to act and to serve. A parent who never learns to give their child space will never equip them with the ability to survive and to thrive on their own.

On a macro scale, by leaving him out of our reading this shabbat our parasha teaches that Moses is mortal. He will not cross over in the Promised Land with us, so we'll need to be able to appoint a chain of leaders who will guide us into our

new chapter. And even God can't be with us every step of the way either, booming instructions, blessings, and warnings.

On a more personal level, the absence of a parent, a mentor, a teacher, even if their absence is by design to create a void, like the parent who steps back as their child learns to walk challenges us to fill the void, to find our place and our way to contribute, to be of service.

On a societal level – this act of stepping back, what the kabbalists (Jewish Mystics) call tzimtzum (contraction/constriction) is an act of creating "conceptual space" either by intention or abdication all around us. There are so many gaps in society, so many places where the Moses of the moment is missing. What is asked of us is not the be Moses, but to be the priests, the Kohanim and the Levites to be of service; in the words of the late great Mr. Rogers to be the helpers.

In his commentary on the book of Joshua, another example of being a servant, F. G. Marchant observed that "God has three sorts of servants in the world: Some are slaves and serve God from fear; others are hirelings and serve for wages; and the last are children, who serve because they love."

Like children learning to walk, we will sometimes stumble and fall as we try to fill that void, but we strive to fill it out of love. Like the child who simply wants to get across the living room carpet into the waiting arms of their parent.

Torah instructs us to be a kingdom of priests (servants) not saints or prophets. Today we walk on our own; a path laid out by Moses our teacher, on a path toward God our parent; a path of being of service to the community; to the greater collective good. Like children learning to walk, we still stumble and fall sometimes, but as we come to trust our own legs, we will discover that it is the only way that we will make it, it's the only way the world can stand; not a world filled with Moses', but as

a world filled with those who strive to be in service of the ideal that Moses and Torah set as a path to follow toward greater meaning, purpose and justice.