

## WHEN IS INDIVIDUAL ACTION NOT ENOUGH? OR IS IT ALWAYS ENOUGH?

### Overview

This resource unpacks the issue of individual action and **systemic change** through the value of **humility**.

### Timing

20-25 minutes, paired with service activity.

### Facilitator Note

- This resource is designed to be facilitated in sections. The first three sections [through the Jewish Anchor] are to take place before the service activity and the last section [Make Meaning and Take Action] at its conclusion as an opportunity for reflection.
- The resource is generic and can be used for almost any service activity that engages with the tension between personal service and systemic change.



### FRAME THE ISSUE (5 MINUTES)

#### *Read the passage below:*

As change-makers working within systems, there are times we are able to see the progress we are making and at other times, we may sometimes question our own ability to make a difference. As we do more without necessarily seeing change taking place, we may become frustrated by the systemic failures which do not address the core fundamental challenges.

#### **Facilitator prompts the group:**

- ▶▶ Where do you situate yourself - in the service activity you are engaging in today - on the spectrum of individual action and systemic change?
- ▶▶ How, when, or where, do you experience frustration in your service work?

The following exploration provides an opportunity to think through these issues with nuance. We will use the model of the Jewish leader Moshe whose humility allowed him to be open to the council and advice of others which helped him recognize the limits of his abilities and effect broad systemic change.



## EXPLORE THE VALUE/JEWISH ANCHOR (10 MINUTES)

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### **Read the passage below:**

Recognizing our role as individuals operating within systems prompts us to think about what we can and cannot change on our own accord. Exploring the value of humility as we are trying to bring about change can help guide us through the places where we might feel stuck and help us think about where we might be able to do even more.

Some of the strongest role models and leaders we have in the Jewish tradition have faced this same tension – negotiating their individual capacities with their mission to effect systemic change. One of the deepest values they carried with them as they grew into leadership roles was the value of humility.

Moshe/Moses, the iconic Jewish leader who led the Israelites out of Egypt is the prime example of where we see this at play. Moshe was a leader who always saw injustice and tried to solve problems.

In the book of Exodus, right before the revelation at Sinai, Moshe's father in law, Yitro, a Midianite priest has come to see how his son-in-law and the people he leads are faring. The narrative describes that Yitro saw Moshe leading the people alone and sitting in judgment without a team, and this gave him cause for concern. He questioned the impact Moshe was really making utilizing this approach, and as an outsider looking in was able to offer a suggestion.

### **Read what Yitro said and then respond to the prompts below:**

*"What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to me and I will give you advice, and may God be with you...Select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and so too all these people will reach their place in peace." (Exodus 18:17-23)*

While undoubtedly Moshe wanted to set up the most effective system for judgment, it must not have been simple for him to hear this critique and suggestion, as it pointed to a place where he had hit a wall operating on his own. Nonetheless, he exercised the quality of humility for which he is best known and heeded Yitro's advice.

***Facilitator prompts the group:***

- ▷▷ What did Yitro see that Moshe was unable to see? Why do you think Moshe was blinded to this reality?
- ▷▷ Where in Moshe's humility do you see resonances of your own qualities of humility?

Humility, in its highest form is often accompanied by a gracious ability to listen to and accept the advice of others. And, it can even feel undermining when you've worked so hard on something, only to have someone from the outside come in and see it differently than you. Further, exercising too much humility may hold us back from pushing ourselves to the furthest extent of our capacities.

***As you go through your service work today, contemplate your own humility in the moment. This should not distract you from the service at hand, but rather prompt you to be self-aware.***

- ▷▷ **Capture** a moment when you exercised humility and it felt helpful in furthering your service.
- ▷▷ **Note** (either in writing, or in your mind) a place where you think exercising humility would have been helpful, but you did not. Why did you not?



## MAKE MEANING & TAKE ACTION (5 MINUTES)

***Facilitator prompts the group:***

At the conclusion of your service work, take a few moments to reflect on your own individual capacities and what you might need to keep on going so that your individual actions can lead to systemic change.

**Ask yourself:**

- ▷▷ Who is your Yitro – ie – the outsider who can look in and see what it is that you need to keep you motivated?
- ▷▷ How can the value of humility keep you motivated as you continue with service and justice work?

**Make Commitments:**

- ▷▷ As you consider committing to more service, think about the person you named above to keep you motivated as you work on an individual level to bring about systemic change. What do you need from them?



## CLOSE WITH INTENTION (3 MINUTES)

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***Read the passage below:***

Today's exploration hits at a core conflict that can appear in almost any service work we do: negotiating the balance between individual action and systemic change. Drawing upon Jewish models and deepening our understanding of how humility can illuminate our own expectations and limitations allows for a more nuanced reflection on what we can and cannot do. Leaning into humility as a value opens a space for us to articulate who we need in our lives to keep us motivated.

***Facilitator prompts the group:***

▶▶ I now know that to keep motivated in my service work I need ...