



Leaders in the desert

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Pinchas, Numbers 25:10-30:1

When Moses requests that God choose a leader to replace him (Numbers 27:17), he describes the leader as one "who will go out before them and who will bring them out and bring them in." The leader is not to walk "before" the people; rather, he is to remain in constant contact with them. He can help bring them in and out only by serving as a model, guide and teacher, but the actual going in and out they will have to do for themselves.

The Midrash teaches that God answers, "Before you command Me concerning My children, command My children concerning Me." Moses proceeds to teach the Jewish people about the daily and holiday sacrifices. God then tells Moses that Joshua, as Moses' most devoted follower, is to succeed him.

Why Joshua?

The Talmud tells us: "The face of Moshe was like the sun; that of Joshua like the moon." Joshua faithfully reflects the light of Moses, as the moon reflects the sun. Joshua shows that he understands that a Jewish leader does not act instead of the people, but rather provides a model to follow. Because he understands this more clearly than anyone else, he is chosen to succeed Moses.

If Joshua was the right man, what was the purpose of teaching the people about the daily and holiday sacrifices?

This reveals that a Jewish leader has another crucial function: uniting the people in a common cause.

Korach contended that if the entire congregation is holy, then there is no need for a leader to rule over them. A leader, whose purpose is to coax and direct the people toward the proper goals, would also be unnecessary to one who is fully developed ethically.

Korach failed to understand the underlying aspect of community, the perfection of which is only reached through a united effort, one in which each Jew fulfills his unique role. The leader serves the function of an orchestra conductor, guiding each player so that the entire orchestra plays together. Even one whose character is perfect still needs a leader to show him how he can function and fulfill his part in unity with the community.

This is why God tells Moses, "Before I appoint a leader to succeed you, first you must teach the people about the korbanot (sacrifices)." An appreciation of the necessity of communal avodah - working toward becoming close to God - necessarily preceded the appointment of a leader. The communal sacrifices require the unified striving of the Jewish people for unity and harmony in service of God.

Never before have we been more cognizant of the need for Jewish unity and the leadership necessary to achieve it.

Absent of divine guidance as to whom we should choose as our role models, we feel absolved of the responsibility to achieve. After all, the fault lies with the leadership. This feeling is incorrect. When we as followers succeed in rallying around those common values we learn in the Torah, not only can we unify, but we are also empowered to choose the kind of leaders we need to follow.

The greatness of our leaders is commensurate with the caliber of their followers. As Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "A good leader can't get too far ahead of his followers."

Let us learn this lesson of leadership and unify around our common values by learning Torah and merit leaders reminiscent of Moses and Joshua.

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