

PINCHAS (NUMBERS 25:10-30:1)**King?...President?...or LEADER!**

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

There are three basic ways to become a national leader: 1) Democratically, being elected by one's countrymen; 2) royally, inheriting the position from one's parent, older sibling, etc; 3) by force.

Each situation has its downside. An elected official needs to remain in the good graces of his constituency if he plans to stay in office. As such, he will tend to avoid controversial issues when possible. He will be tempted to preside, not with his conscience, but rather with his consciousness of what the voters want to hear.

One need only examine the decadent lifestyles of Europe's royal families to see the bankruptcy of that system. When one rules solely by virtue of the fact that his parent was a monarch, he is not likely to be the person most qualified for the job.

One who rules due to taking over the position in a coup d'etat is not necessarily ruling with the will of the governed. His qualifications for leadership have been determined based upon military prowess.

Moses was approaching the end of his life. He knew that he would not be permitted to enter the Promised Land. His brother Aaron the High Priest and his sister Miriam the Prophetess were gone. It was time to pass the mantle of leadership on to a successor. Moses wanted to make sure that the Israelites had proper leadership. He wanted to make sure that the next leader would be one who could meet their needs:

[All statements in brackets are Rashi's commentary on the verse]

"G-d of all living souls, [who knows that every soul, every person, is different and needs a leader who can tolerate diverse people with diverse personalities] *appoint a man over the community who will go out before them* [not like other kings who sit at home and send others to war; rather as I did, joining them in battle] *...let him take them out and bring them in* [to the Land of Israel]; *let G-d's community not be like sheep that have no shepherd.*" (Numbers, 27:16-17)

G-d responded that He would grant that request. He added one component that Moses, in his humility, would never have considered. In order to insure that the people would accept Joshua, it was necessary that he have the endorsement of Moses himself:

"Take Joshua, son of Nun, a man in whom there is spirit, [as you requested, a man who can meet the needs of the diverse personalities of the nation,] and place your hand upon him. [Give him some leadership status in your lifetime.] Stand him before Elazar the Priest and before the entire community and appoint him in their presence. Place some of your glory upon him [just as the moon shines with the reflection of the sun, so too should Joshua receive some of the divine radiation that shone from your face when you came down from Mt. Sinai (see Exodus, 34:35)], so the entire community will obey him..." Moses did as G-d had commanded him. He took Joshua and stood him before Elazar the Priest and the entire community. He placed his HANDS upon him and appointed him. [G-d had told him to place his HAND on Joshua. Moses responded with both hands, demonstrating his generosity and willingness to honor his successor] (verses 18-20, 22-23)

Moses had dedicated his life to the selfless service and leadership of his people. It was often a thankless job. He had often dealt with a nation that blamed him for their problems. He then had to defend them so that G-d wouldn't punish them for their insolence. He encouraged Joshua to be prepared for the rewards and frustrations of leadership. G-d saw to it that Joshua's greatness was visible for all to see.

That event took place over 3,000 years ago. Despite persecutions and tribulations that would have led a lesser nation to extinction, we have, somehow, managed to survive. How have we done it? We have done it through the merits of our leaders. Throughout the generations, spiritual giants have led us. These great leaders have given us the encouragement and guidance we have needed in order to endure.

Who were these leaders? Were they Herzl and Ben Gurion? Were they Weizman and Rabin? Not quite. Every generation of Jews has been led by great RABBINIC leaders, who led, not on the basis of political election or inheritance, but rather by the force of their own piety and adherence to Torah Tradition.

The other way doesn't work. Herzl, the great founder of the Zionist movement, had at one point advocated the mass conversion of Jewish children to Catholicism. His children were not Jewish. Moses Mendelssohn was an eighteenth-century philosopher who thought he would save world Jewry by introducing them to German culture and widening the spectrum of their intellectual exposure. Some of his children and most of his grandchildren ended up as Christians. A tree that doesn't draw nourishment from its roots soon withers and dies.

The Torah leaders of each generation were leaders because they were the primary students of the leaders of the previous generation. The leaders of every Chassidic movement can trace themselves back in an unbroken chain to the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of that movement. Almost every major non-Chassidic yeshiva can trace itself back to the Vilna Gaon. The Sephardic Torah community can do the same in linking to its early leaders. Torah observance continues today because, as the Talmud says in the

beginning of Ethics of the Fathers, "Moses received the Torah from Sinai, and transmitted it to Joshua, who gave it to the Elders, who gave it to the Prophets, who gave it to the members of the Great Assembly." The Talmud goes on to list the tradition of teacher-to-student as the Torah was disseminated.

(An interesting analysis of the accuracy of Jewish tradition, especially in view of the fact that even very religious groups have different interpretations of some concepts, can be by clicking [Accuracy of Torah Text, Process of Transmission, What is the Oral Torah, and Did God Speak at Sinai?](#))

The leaders of world Jewry were not appointed or elected. Every major Torah authority of every generation was a leader BECAUSE HE WAS APPROVED by his teachers, not because the masses agreed with his interpretations. Torah leadership is not a popularity contest. In the Purim story, Mordecai refused to bow to Haman, leading Haman to try to destroy the Jews. Many people blamed Mordecai for their predicament. The actual cause of their dilemma was that G-d was punishing them for ignoring Mordecai when he told them not to attend the king's party!

Democracy is NOT a Jewish concept. If it were, we would have gone back to Egypt when 10 out of 12 spies said that capturing the Land of Israel would be impossible. (See "What Was Moses' Last Name?" and "Ten Times One Equals Infinity") (For that matter, if we followed the majority, we would have listened to the 80% of the Jews who chose not to leave Egypt in the first place!)

Jewish leadership is defined by demanding fidelity to Torah values, even when that demand falls mostly on deaf ears. Pinchas, the nephew of Moses whose name graces this week's Torah reading, was rewarded with Priesthood because he took an unpopular position. (See Numbers, 25:6-9) There were members of the nation who ridiculed him for his actions. Unlike politicians, who lead based upon consensus, a Torah leader does something very unique. He actually leads!

In 1995, over three hundred thousand Jews gathered in Jerusalem to escort the great sage, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach to his resting place. Rabbi Auerbach was not politically active, and his only official position was as dean of a Yeshiva. Yet the world's Torah Jewry flocked to this humble man in his humble home for guidance and inspiration. The secular Israeli media were dumbfounded over the fact that almost a third of a million people had turned out for the funeral of an obscure rabbi whom many of them had never heard of!

However, the memory and influence of this Torah giant will live on long after the Baraks and Sharons of the world are forgotten. Why? Because he was a link in the unbroken chain back to Mt. Sinai. He was no less a successor to Moses than Joshua was.

Torah is available to anyone who wishes to study it. Joshua earned the right/obligation of leadership by virtue of the fact that he was a student of Moses. He attached himself to Moses and totally dedicated himself to absorbing his mentor's teachings. Who will be the leaders who will link OUR children and

grandchildren back to their roots?

It is up to us.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

© 2001 Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz. Reprint permitted for non-commercial use with attribution to torahtalk.org.