

Dear Community,

In this week's Torah portion we are introduced to the notion of s'micha, rabbinic ordination. After being told by G-d that his end is approaching, Moshe asks G-d to appoint his successor. The Medrash Tanchuma relates that after the episode of the daughters of Tz'lophchod, in which G-d taught Moshe the laws of inheritance, Moshe began aspiring to pass down his position as an inheritance to his children. Moshe felt that his children would be most fit to continue his legacy as leader of the Jewish people. From a cynical perspective, Moshe's motivations seem clear: a desire to pass on to his children a position of power and respect. However, attributing such a motive to Moshe is illogical. Moshe's time in the desert is thankless and hard. [MOU1] At times Moshe even asks to die, to be spared from the role G-d assigned to him. Moshe's dedication to the wellbeing of the Jewish people shines through the last two books of the Torah. To assume that as a father and a leader he would aspire to subject his son and his people to the tribulations of an unfit leader would be a fallacy.

Moshe understood something about leadership that many of us fail to understand today. The Or Hachaim writes that Moshe was the ideal leader of the Jewish people. His soul was composed of an amalgamation of all of the souls of the Jewish people, and as such he was able to relate to and be a part of each one of them. For a leader to be effective, all of his or her followers must be able to feel that the leader is connected to them. Moshe felt that the person closest to his disposition and genetic and spiritual make-up would be one of his children: as we know but sometimes deny, our children are modeled after us. As such Moshe felt that the Jews needed someone like him, with his makeup, to effectively lead them.

G-d does not disagree with Moshe about the components of an effective leader. However, he tells him that the one who has the capacity to lead the way is not his biological son, but his spiritual heir. As the person who has studied and assisted his mentor for the past forty years, Yehoshua is inculcated with Moshe's wisdom and spirit. He is the one most fit to continue his legacy. The Talmud (B.B, 75b) writes that Moshe was the sun, and Yehoshua can be compared to the moon. There are those who interpret this as a relegation of Yehoshua to second-tier status – after all, he's merely a reflection of his master. However, I believe this to be a statement of the proper pedagogy of leadership.

In the liturgy recited at a circumcision, we bless the little baby “זֶה הַקָּטָן גָּדוֹל יִהְיֶה” this ‘small’ one should become ‘large.’ This blessing seems bizarre. The Vilna Gaon writes that when one wishes to understand the true meaning of a word one must look to where the word was first used in the Torah. Rav Solovetchik notes that these words were first used in describing the sun and the moon. The light of the moon is called ‘small’ due to it being a reflection of the sun. Large implies something which can generate its own light. We bless the child that he should be able to become a source of

light, but this can only be accomplished by following mentors to understand what a leader is and what leadership should be.

These days the notion of young leaders has become the new crusade. If you are a non-profit looking for grants, create some sort of leadership initiative and you could retire happily. However, in our zeal to create young leaders we are pushing young, energetic, confident children into positions that require nuance, experience and wisdom. Inspiring young people to take active roles is wonderful, but by placing them into positions of influence and power with no mentors or guides is a recipe for disaster. If we want to create young leaders, we must take responsibility for who will guide them, educate them, and teach them to navigate the many shades between virtue and folly. Before I started my position as a rabbi, all my mentors and teachers made sure that I had an awareness of the limits of my competence and the contact information of wise men and women with whom to consult. In fact, I was told by a mentor of mine “the greatest damage to society does not come from those with evil intentions, rather from those with noble ones.”

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein