

Parshat Shoftim 5786– What Type of Leaders We Need!

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Successful leadership is challenging in that by its very nature, it must simultaneously encompass ideational as well as practical and pragmatic elements. How does one hold onto their ideals and vision while at the same time addressing the stark realities that continue to present, often threatening to derail their vision of successful and effective leadership? We see this continually with Moshe Rabbeinu throughout our Torah as well as others that are entrusted with the responsibility of leading, organizing, troubleshooting, maintaining a sense of purpose and so much else. As the paradigmatic Jewish leader, he shows the struggle with responsibility and not the power of privilege. G-d recognizes this when he explains how G-d and Moshe relate to each other in a unique manner in BaMidbar 12:3:

והאיש משה עניו מאד מכל האדם אשר על פני האדמה

Now the man Moshe was very meek, more so than all the men that were upon the face of the earth.

Moshe's most important quality is his humility. The very doubts and angst he expresses at various points indicates that he knows fully well that his position is not about power, but something quite different. This is what Ramban wants us to understand – this is not about doubt or hesitation regarding the task of leadership, but rather an acute understanding of the gravity it holds. It is in that tone that we consider what we are taught here in our Parsha as it begins in Devarim Perek 16:

18 “You must appoint judges and officers for yourselves in all your cities that God, your God, is giving you, for each of your tribes. They must judge the people by rendering fair judgments.

יחשפטם ושטרים תתן-להם בכל-שעריך אשר יתנה אלהיה נתן להם לשבטים ושפטו את-העם משפט-צדק:

19 You must not pervert justice. You must not show partiality. You must not accept a bribe, for bribery blinds the eyes of the sages and perverts the just words of the Torah.’

יטלא-תטה משפט לא תפיר פנים ולא-תקח שחד כי השחד יעור עיני חכמים ויסלף דברי צדיקים:

**20Justice, justice must you pursue, in order that
you live and take possession of the land that God,
your God, is giving you.**

**כַּדְדֵם צֶדֶק תִּרְדּוּ לְמַעַן תִּחְיֶה וְיִרְשֶׁת
אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־יְיָתָנָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ נָתַן לָךְ:**

The qualities of import are quite clearly articulated here – rendering fair judgments, not perverting justice, not showing partiality, pursuing justice always as this is the very rootedness of our idealized and dictated humanity to be facilitated by leadership with humility.

We learn in Pirke Avot, 2:5 that leadership requires that we rise to the occasion and do what is needed in all cases.

הוא הֵיָה אֹמֶר, אֵין בּוֹר יָרָא חֲטָא, וְלֹא עִם הָאָרֶץ חֲסִיד, וְלֹא הַבִּיטָן לְמַד, וְלֹא הַקַּפְדָן מִלְמֵד, וְלֹא כָל הַמְרָבָה בְּסִחוּרָה
מִחֲכִים. וּבְמָקוֹם שָׂאִין אָנָשִׁים, הַשְׁתַּדֵּל לִהְיוֹת אִישׁ:

It was said: A brute is not sin-fearing, nor is an ignorant person pious; nor can a timid person learn, nor can an impatient person teach; nor will someone who engages too much in business become wise. **In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man.**

As my husband often reminds me, there are more good people in the world than those who are not so. However, I must admit I have my doubts as there is too much power-grabbing, fighting to control more and more, political positioning for personal gain and so forth. Yes, there are those who eschew the type of wisdom, the type of leadership that enables others and protects all. But... and so ...it is up to us to remember and practice: **הַשְׁתַּדֵּל לִהְיוֹת אִישׁ**

Earlier in Pirke Avot 1:6 - 7 we learn:

Joshua the son of Perachia and Nitai the Arbelite received from them. Joshua the son of Perachia would say: Assume for yourself a master, acquire for yourself a friend, and judge every man to the side of merit.

יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן פְּרַחְיָה וְנִטַּי הָאֶרְבֵּלִי קִבְּלוּ מֵהֶם. יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן פְּרַחְיָה אוֹמֵר: עֲשֵׂה לָךְ רֵב, וְקַנָּה לָךְ חֵבֵר, וְהוֹי דָן אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם לְכַף זְכוּת.

Nitai the Arbelite would say: Distance yourself from a bad neighbor, do not cleave to a wicked person, and do not abandon belief in retribution.

נִטַּי הָאֶרְבֵּלִי אוֹמֵר: הִרְחַק מִשְׁכֵּן רָע, וְאַל תִּתְחַבֵּר לְרָשָׁע, וְאַל תִּתְנַאֵשׁ מִן הַפּוֹרְעָנוּת.

These verses early in the text of Pirke Avot is reminding us that while the chain of leadership is established, along the way we SHOULD NOT and CANNOT assume that all leaders are necessarily worthy, thus we must seek out those who are both in terms of those on whom we depend for guidance and those we join with in learning and living. Clearly, we learn that we must remain steadfast in taking initiative and responsibility for ethical behavior, even when others around us may not be setting a good example.

This tension between vision and pragmatism plays out concretely in the early days of the Israeli state. David Ben Gurion, a Socialist Zionist, was concerned both with the involvement and inclusion of all in the practical application of what Israel would be while never forgetting the rootedness of why we were there in the first place. It was in that vein that a few hundred Yeshiva students who were studying consistently and elucidating texts were exempt from service in the defense of Israel, to which all citizenry was committed — an accommodation some now consider a miscalculation. I'd suggest something else: it was an attempt to hold the aspirational aspect of leadership together with pragmatism, observing what was around him. This was the same balance Moshe Rabbeinu held, always weighing the aspiration of reaching Eretz Yisrael against the immediate, pragmatic demands of the journey, to which he had to be attentive while maintaining a vision of the ultimate goal. So what exactly is the goal we all strive for?

While I love Israel, I, like many Israelis, am not happy with many things happening in its government right now on a variety of levels. This war is horrible and the history is so complicated and the fissures that are present so deep. I too wish it would end, and with that the threat to too many lives. We all, as G-d created beings, mourn the many lives lost, and YES, as a human being I mourn all lives created in the image of G-d that have been lost. Terrorism is terrible and Israel lives in the impossible situation in which its threat is at all of its doors. It is this pragmatic reality that is threatening the ideational foundation on which it is based, to be a different type of society that embraces, respects and protects all. (Needless to say, we are seeing similar dynamics in the United States as well.)

Let's explore the Chabad model of leadership for a moment. Chabad leaders are called *shulichim* and they are on *shlichut*. That is, they are leaders of a community by virtue of the message they

are carrying to that community based on their belief in foundational values and teachings as well as the lives they live. What a wonderful model of leadership – one we can all subscribe to in our own lives in our own ways *if* we are willing to accept and carry forth a worthwhile message informed by our most foundational teachings.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z"l shared these words that continually ring in my ears:

A good leader leads with a worthwhile message. A great leader enables others to lead with that worthwhile message.

Every teacher has an opportunity to do exactly this with their students. Every head of an organization or committee does as well. Every parent, every older child in a family, every elected official of any entity large or small – we all HAVE the opportunity to share a worthwhile message, live by that message and carry it on to others. Potentially, we could all be on our own Shlichut if we were to understand the most basic principles of leadership according to Jewish teachings, accepting its responsibility humbly, while eschewing the lapse into power that we have seen in too many cases.

Throughout this text of Parshat Shoftim, we are reminded to stay within the confines of OUR teachings, our values, our practices and NOT to follow others. Do we do this in our lives? Do we CAREFULLY and INTENTIONALLY choose whom we follow and what teachings they hold that are worthy? In our age of media outtakes and one line AI fueled summaries, do we continue to look, as Aviva Zornberg teaches, underneath and behind all words to determine their true and intended meaning? To be intentional takes time and discernment, not the easy way of the brute, the ignorant or the timid as Pirke Avot teaches.

In Perek 17, the *limits* are placed on leaders to ensure that they maintain the integrity of their position. Too many possessions, too much control, too much idleness does not create the context for them to be the discerning and proper leaders as intended in our text. We learn as follows:

15 you may indeed appoint a king over yourself, one whom God, your God, chooses. You must appoint a king over yourself from among your brothers; you may not appoint a foreigner—one who is not your brother—over yourself.

טוּשׁוּם תִּשִׁים עָלֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר יְהוָה
אֱלֹהֶיךָ בּוֹ מִקֵּרֵב אֲחֵיךָ תִּשִׁים עָלֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ לֹא
תוּכַל לִתֵּן עָלֶיךָ אִישׁ נָכְרִי אֲשֶׁר לֹא-אֶחָיִךָ הוּא:

16 But he must not acquire many horses for himself, so that he not bring the people back to Egypt in order to procure many horses, for God has said to you, ‘You must never return along that path.’

טוֹרֶךְ לֹא-יִרְכֹּה-לּוֹ סוּסִים וְלֹא-יִשָּׁב אֶת-הָעַם
מִצִּרְיָמָה לְמַעַן הִרְבּוֹת סוּס וַיְהִינֶה אָמַר לָכֶם לֹא
תִסְפּוּן לָשׁוּב בְּדֶרֶךְ הַזֶּה עוֹד:

17 He must not take many wives for himself, in order that his heart not be distracted. He must not acquire too much silver and gold for himself.

יִזְוֹלָא יִרְכֹּה-לּוֹ נָשִׁים וְלֹא יָסוּר לְבָבוֹ וַגִּסָּף
וְזָקָב לֹא יִרְכֹּה-לּוֹ מָאָד:

18 When he sits upon his royal throne, he must write for himself a second copy of this Torah on a scroll from the Torah scroll in the care of the Levitic priests.

יִתְוַהֲבָה כְּשִׁבְתּוֹ עַל כִּסֵּא מִמְּלַכְתּוֹ וְכָתַב לוֹ
אֶת-מִשְׁנֵה הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת עַל-סֵפֶר מִלְפָּנֵי
הַכֹּהֲנִים הַלְוִיִּם:

19 It must remain with him, and he must read from it every day of his life, so that he may learn to revere God, his God; to safeguard all the words of this Torah and these rules by studying them so that he know how to properly perform them.

יִטְוֶהיָתָה עִמּוֹ וְקָרָא בּוֹ כָּל-יְמֵי חַיָּיו לְמַעַן יִלְמַד
לִירְאֵה אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו לְשֹׁמֵר אֶת-כָּל-דְּבָרֵי
הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת-הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה לַעֲשֹׂתָם:

20 so that his heart will not become haughty over his brothers; and so that he will not deviate either to the right or to the left from the commandment, in order that he prolong his time over his kingdom—he and his sons—among Israel.

כְּלִבְלִתִּי רוּם-לְבָבוֹ מֵאֲחָיו וּלְבִלְתִּי סוּר
מִן-הַמִּצְוָה יְמִין וּשְׂמָאוֹל לְמַעַן יִגְאָרֶיךָ יָמִים
עַל-מַמְלַכְתּוֹ הוּא וּבָנָיו בִּקְרֵב יִשְׂרָאֵל:

I would like to suggest that the ideal is summed up in this Passuk from Perek 18:

3 Be wholehearted with God, your God.

יִגְמְמִים תְּהִיָּה עִם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

Wholeheartedness, complete **תְּמִיִּם** like Noah so long ago in Bereshit Perek 6:

And the Lord saw that the evil of man was great in the earth, and every imagination of his heart was only evil all the time.

וַיֹּרֶא יְהוָה כִּי רַבָּה רָעַת הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ וְכָל־יִצְרָם מַחְשַׁבֹת לִבּוֹ רָק רָע כָּל־הַיּוֹם:

6 And the Lord regretted that He had made man upon the earth, and He became grieved in His heart.

וַיִּנְחַם יְהוָה כִּי־עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֱלֹהֵי לִבּוֹ:

7 And the Lord said, "I will blot out man, whom I created, from upon the face of the earth, from man to cattle to creeping thing, to the fowl of the heavens, for I regret that I made them."

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֲמַחֶה אֶת־הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר־בָּרָאתִי מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה מֵאָדָם עַד־בְּהֵמָה עַד־רֶמֶשׂ וְעַד־עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם כִּי נַחֲמִיתִי כִּי עָשִׂיתִם:

8 But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.

חֲנֹנִם מָצָא חֵן בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה:

9 These are the generations of Noah, Noah was a righteous man he was perfect in his generations; Noah walked with God.

זֶּה־הֵם הַדּוֹרֹת נֹחַ נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תְּמִיִּם הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים הִתְהַלָּךְ־נֹחַ:

I have often taught that this text gives us a conditional framework for Noah's goodness, not being focused on his perfection but on his simple humility and willingness to "walk with G-d". But let's turn that around a bit now, okay? In our Parsha this quality of being **תְּמִיִּם** is a *high* standard — hold onto your beliefs and standards of behavior even if others are not — *this is leadership at its best*.

3 Be wholehearted with God, your God.

יִגְמְמִים תְּהִיָּה עִם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

Not such an easy call when we look around our world. Leadership is about intent. Leadership is about the group as a whole, NOT the leader themselves.

As Rabbi Sacks z"l teaches, there are seven basic components to Jewish leadership as understood within our Torah's framework:

1. Leadership begins with taking responsibility.
2. Leadership does NOT happen by one person alone.
3. Leadership is about ensuring the future.
4. Leadership involves a continued commitment to learning.
5. Leadership is believing in, protecting and ensuring the well-being of the people you lead.
6. Leadership is understanding your time and place and reality.
7. Proper leadership is hard, stressful and demanding and always holding oneself accountable.

What if we all agreed to practice our principle of

עֲשֵׂה לָךְ רֵב, וְקַנְיָה לָךְ חֵבֵר, וְהָיִי דָן אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם לְכַף זְכוּת

Make for yourself a rav, acquire for yourself a friend, and judge every person favorably.

from Pirke Avot in choosing our leaders, those whom we will follow in every aspect of our lives? How might our lives look different? How would we choose our leaders? Moshe Rabbeinu was not a leader because he was flawless, but rather because of who and what he was as an איש תמים. Let us recall the argument Miriam and then Aaron made against Moshe, not particularly understanding his perspective and G-d's words of sanction regarding the unseen quality of humility he exemplified.

Leadership is hard, it is supposed to be intentional and generative, ideally it is unselfish. This was the ideal indicated in our Jewish teachings. Influence is valued over authority, leading by example is a pre-requisite, humility and walking humbly with G-d and sharing G-d's teachings is the first and most important step. Something we can all learn from the idea of Shlichut from our Chabad friends. Their leadership is based on (whether we agree with everything they bring to us or not) foundational values about being human and believing in all that we are supposed to be as B'nai Yisrael.

Contemporary secular writing on leadership arrives at a similar place. Diane Belcher of Harvard Business Impact writes:

Leadership character extends beyond just ethics and includes traits like compassion, willingness to serve others, and forgiveness. It sets the tone for judgment and decision making that works for the group.

This is the type of leadership that Parshat Shoftim explains – a leadership that is worthy to lead a people who are worthy of their community, their land and their very being.

Shabbat Shalom!