

FOLLOW THE LEADER

by Rabbi Shlomo Jarcaig

At the time Moshe came down from Mount Sinai with the Tablets of the Decalogue, the Torah records a conversation with his student, Yehoshua (Joshua). Yehoshua had been separated from the rest of the Jewish people while he awaited Moshe's return at the bottom of the mountain, and was, therefore, unaware of the events of the Golden Calf. As Moshe finished his descent and they both heard the commotion in the camp, "Yehoshua heard the sound of the people in its shouting and he said to Moshe, 'The sound of battle is in the camp!'" (Shemos/Exodus 32:17) Moshe corrected him that the noise emanated from the sinful activity in which they were engaged. The Torah does not contain extraneous information. Why was it necessary for the Torah to record Yehoshua's innocent mistake? What message is the Torah conveying by bringing it to our attention?

Yehoshua was destined to succeed Moshe as leader of the Jewish people. The Talmud in Tractate Bava Basra contrasts Moshe and Yehoshua, comparing Moshe's face to the face of the sun, versus Yehoshua's face, which was like the face of the moon. Netziv (acronym of Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, 1817-1893, Rosh Yeshiva/Dean of the famed Yeshiva of Volozhin and author of the biblical commentary Haamek Davar) explains that the sun's shine is so magnificent that as long as it is present, the moon's light is effectively non-existent. Similarly, as long as Moshe served as the Divine messenger to radiate G-d's light upon the world, Yehoshua could not. Thus, concludes Rabbi Berlin, the verse indicates that for all of Yehoshua's inborn talents, he could not succeed as a leader during Moshe's lifetime.

But Yehoshua's equation to the moon goes further still.

The teachings of Moshe - the quintessential leader of the Children of Israel who delivered G-d's Torah to G-d's people - are the light that forever bestows light on this world, like the sun. The light of Yehoshua was the moon - a reflected light. True, Yehoshua was a born leader with all of the necessary talents and abilities. But the Torah teaches us here that Jewish leaders do not simply step forward and lead. A future Jewish leader first cleaves to today's leader, learning from his actions and admonitions. After years, even decades, of tutelage he will come to understand what is expected of him, enabling him to brilliantly reflect the radiance of his mentor. Even then, it is merely a reflection; the student is always the "moon" to his mentor's "sun". The timeless lesson the Torah teaches in this verse is that a capable Jewish leader must first be a capable Jewish follower.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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