

GREAT LEADERS

by Rabbi Shlomo Jarcaig

In his first public address to his followers after he was appointed as a leader in the community of Vilna some 120 years ago, Rabbi Yaakov HaDarshan took note of a peculiarity in the verses in which Moshe requests of G-d to appoint a new leader. As Moshe neared the end of his life, he expressed to G-d his concern that he be replaced with a competent leader. "May G-d, Lord of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the assembly, who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall take them out and bring them in; and let the assembly of G-d not be like sheep that for them there is no shepherd." (Bamidbar/Numbers 27:16-17) Following the maxim that the Torah is always concise and precise in its use of words - never is there a superfluous, purposeless expression - Rabbi Yaakov noted the most succinct way for Moshe to conclude his request would be to ask that the assembly not be like sheep "bli roeh", without shepherd; why did the Torah add seemingly unnecessary words and ask that they not be like sheep "asher ein lahem roeh", that for them there is no shepherd? The word "lahem" - for them - is a necessary characteristic of a leader. Moshe knew that there would certainly be another leader. His concern was that it be a leader who would not be concerned with his own honor and reputation. They would certainly have a new shepherd, but Moshe wanted to make sure that he would be "lahem", for them.

Indeed, the Midrash (Shemos Rabbah 2:2) tells us that before G-d chose to appoint King David as the leader of His nation, He tested him to see if he was compassionate with the sheep of which he was then in charge. In order to earn the responsibility of being the King of Israel, he had to demonstrate that he was prepared to sacrifice his own energies for those under his charge.

Going about our daily business most of us do consider ourselves to be amongst "the leaders", but, in reality, we are all leaders in particular circumstances in our lives. As responsible superiors we are the mentor for our children and coworkers; in many circumstances we become a role model for peers and acquaintances. The Torah's paradigm for leadership is an essential lesson for all: the successful leader is one who focuses on the needs and wants of the constituency.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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