

A FLOCK WITHOUT A SHEPHERD

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"... and do not let the Congregation of HaShem be like a flock which has no shepherd." [27:17]

G-d tells Moshe that he will not lead the congregation into the Land of Israel -- instead, he will die in the wilderness. How does Moshe respond? By asking HaShem to appoint a new leader, to be certain that someone remains to guide them. Of course, we would have expected Moshe to pray for continued life, but his first priority was to ensure that the Congregation had a leader. The Medrash says that this tells us the greatness of the righteous -- they set aside their own needs and look out for those of the congregation, even when they are about to die.

Moshe compares our leaders to shepherds, guiding us in the right direction. The Sfas Emes writes that although our true shepherd is HaShem himself ("G-d is my shepherd, I shall not want" [Psalm 23:1]), it is nonetheless crucial that we have a guide, a person to show us what G-d wants from us, what being godly is all about, through instruction and -- even more important -- through action.

Today, in Baltimore, I understand this need a little better. I feel what it means to have no shepherd. For although there are many in our community to whom people can turn for guidance, it was always clear that the Rosh HaYeshiva (Dean), Rabbi Shmuel Yaakov Weinberg zt"l, was the shepherd of the community.

The Ksav Sofer writes that as we all understand, an ordinary shepherd is not truly interested in benefiting the sheep, but in benefiting himself. After all, he does not belong to the sheep; the sheep belong to him, and so his needs take precedence. Moshe, says the Ksav Sofer, was concerned that the next leader of the Congregation of Israel be someone who was entirely devoted to benefiting his flock rather than himself, who would devote himself entirely to their needs. Moshe wanted to ensure not only that there be a leader, but that he "belong" to the Congregation.

During the eulogies yesterday, one speaker said that every person would describe the Rosh Yeshiva differently, based upon their own interaction. This is surely true -- yet all agreed that the Rosh Yeshiva was the sort of shepherd Moshe sought. If you had a question or concern, then he made himself available to you, even if he was tired or ill. My wife and I know this ourselves, since we went to see him just several weeks ago. This was before anyone realized that he was terminally ill, but when he was recovering from surgery. It didn't matter that he was still recovering; he wanted to be available to people, including those of us who didn't realize how much pain he was in until we were already in his presence.

One could not meet the Rosh Yeshiva without feeling that he cared about you as an individual. This is what made his guidance so desirable and so palatable -- it reflected not only his wisdom, but the end result of applying all of that wisdom to determine what was truly best for you.

As I said, we still have others to whom to turn for guidance, others who also demonstrate their constant care and concern for each individual who comes through their door. As G-d answered Moshe's request then, He will answer it now. But one thing we also know: our remaining guides, themselves, will no longer have the Rosh Yeshiva either.

May the memory of the righteous be for a blessing.

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