

RUNNING FROM HONOR – WITH CAUSE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

How can I carry alone your being bothersome, your burdens, and your quarrels?

It used to be hard to find people to assume positions of communal leadership. The best people ran from *kavod*, and were unwilling to give up time that could be spent on learning, which was the all-consuming passion of the most spiritually oriented. Those who did see the necessity did not win the approval of all of their colleagues. Thus, Mordechai's entrance to government service under Achashverosh, say Chazal,^[2] was hailed by most – but definitely not all – of his peers.

With the passage of time, and the decline in spiritual level relative to earlier generations, it would become easier for qualified people to don the mantle of leadership. Or so we would think. Our observation is that this is not the case. Unfortunately, it is not because people have catapulted to spiritual heights previously lost. People avoid these positions because of more pedestrian, practical reasons. Moshe Rabbenu anticipated all of them.

One reason is the tendency of many people to assume the worst of their leaders. This occurs not only when there are grounds for suspicion, but even in regard to the most perfect leaders a community could know. Thus, we find that people murmured behind Moshe's back, accusing him of all kinds of illicit behavior, consuming people's goods, etc. This behavior corresponds to the second element in our *pasuk*: their burdens. They aren't "bothersome" in this regard – they don't make the official toil unnecessarily – but they create a burden on the shoulders of the leader. Wherever he goes, the weight of unfair scrutiny and criticism weighs upon him. Potential leaders who have watched this occur to others run from it like the plague.

A second factor is the need of some people to always be right. They refuse to give in, even when that would be best for all concerned. When a leader has to deal with a large number of people, every one of whom feels compelled to emerge as the "winner," it takes a huge amount of time and energy to accomplish anything. This is vexing and "bothersome." Potential leaders say to themselves, "Do I really need this?"

Lastly, an occupational hazard of leadership is observing the constant battles between people and families. The leader may stay out of the battle zone, but it still hurts the leader with a more elevated nature to see so many people at their worst. Moshe refers, appropriately enough, to this behavior as their "quarrels." Potential leaders see this as an occupational environment as desirable as the broom-closet office.

Moshe's rhetorical question to Hashem, then, is really an inventory of the reasons that leadership can be uncomfortable. It will help us understand a riddle to sorts in the Book of Shoftim. The people of Shechem accepted Avimelech's offer to rule over them, replacing the seventy sons of Yerubaal. Avimelech then had them all slaughtered. Yotom survived, and challenged the people of Shechem with the famous *mashal* of the three trees.^[3] The greater population of trees sought a king. They approached the olive tree. It declined. Why, it asked, would it give up its honor in order to wave at other trees? Next, the trees offered the throne to the fig tree, which demurred. Why, it objected, would it want to compromise its goodly produce, just to be able to wave at other trees? The *mashal* continues with the trees approaching the grapevine. It, too, declined the offer. Why would it want to jeopardize its wine, which gladdens the hearts of many?

Having few options, continues Yotam, the rest of the trees make their proposal to the thorn bush. It cautions them: If you make your offer to me in all sincerity, and truly wish me to rule over you, then take shelter in my protection. If, however, you are not sincere, then a fire will come forth from within me, and consume all of you.

What does this all mean?

Let's examine the qualities of the three trees. The oil of the olive tree symbolizes the loftiness of honor and elevation. Oil floats atop other liquids. Its bright light honors important occasions. Wine speaks of enjoyment and comfort. The fig was an important food. It filled and sustained large numbers of people.

Yotam's point was that the evil Avimelech rose to power because all of the good candidates withdrew from the running. Some were like the olive tree. They declined because their honor would be impugned. Too many people would be quick to attack any leader, just as people had besmirched Moshe. Some turned down the job because they would be wearied by those who insisted they were always right. Like the fig, they questioned why they should diminish their established productivity by having to please the bothersome. Others spurned leadership because they enjoyed their happy dispositions, like the vine that produces wine. They shuddered at the thought of having to witness countless silly battles between people.

The deserving candidates all having bowed out, the people turned to the unattractive thorn bush. Yotam warns them. Do you realize what you are getting into? Do you fully expect to be irritated by the thorns and thistles, and completely accept the inferior leader as your best choice? If you are prepared to be stuck by the thorns, it may work. But if you agreed to the wrong choice because you were too lazy or uninvolved to make the right one, then realize that among you are bothersome, burdensome, and quarrelsome people. Install a leader who is evil or just ineffective, and the community will self-immolate through the fire of internal divisiveness and *machlokes*.

The problem has been around since the time of Moshe – and even before. Nothing has changed – certainly not for the better.

1. Based on HaMedrash V'HaMaaseh, Devarim (1) by R. Yechezkel Lifshitz zt"l.
2. Megilah 16B.
3. Shoftim 9:8-15.