

# SYSTEM FAILURE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

*The kohanim did not say, "Where is Hashem." The Torah teachers did not know me. The leaders of the flock rebelled against me. The prophets prophesied in the name of Baal.*<sup>[2]</sup>

In contemporary terms, we would say that Yirmiyah was having a bad day at the office. He had a message from Above, and no one was listening. He lists all the people – ostensibly important people in the community – giving him a tough time. There is much more, however, to this list of failures than that.

Without three essential qualities, a person cannot succeed as a leader of a Torah community. First, he must be an exemplar of proper behavior. He must not possess any flaws in this conduct, whether in regard to his relationship with Hashem or with other people. He should serve as a model for others, so that they imitate his ways while showing reverence and respect for him.

Next, he must be a master of Torah. When people come to him for guidance about their conduct, he needs to possess the broad knowledge and the depth to be able to respond appropriately, without stumbling and without hesitation.

Finally, he needs to be proactive. When he detects problem areas in the behavior of his charges, he should not wait until they approach him for instruction. He takes the initiative in prodding his community to own up to their shortcoming and work to change them. He is not afraid to get up and criticize his flock.

When he does speak out, he is explicit, directive and pointed in his *mussar* and instructions. He resists the temptation to use generalities, and only hint at the shortcomings of his audience. He could avoid disturbing the sensitivities of people if he spoke only in vague terms. If he avoided specifying the changes he wished to see, he might keep more people happy. He could rely on jargon – "Be responsible!" "Remember your Creator!" "Be the person you should be!" – without having to call out specific faults. But the effective leader does not opt for the easy way out – not for them, and not for himself. He will admonish his flock when they come up short, and the meaning of his words will be unmistakable and unambiguous.

Looking back at our *haftorah*, we see these three qualifications of the proper leader, although in reverse order, and all observed in the breach. Yirmiyah derides the leaders of the people. "The *kohanim* did not say, "Where is Hashem?" The *kohanim* would speak in generalities and vague terms. But they balked at putting the hard questions to the people. Where is Hashem? What does he want

from us? What are the consequences of our disobedience? The *kohanim* could have been a force for needed change. They dropped the ball.

Yirmiyah continues. The shortcomings of the leaders went beyond ineffectual rebuke. When people came to the Torah experts with questions, they could not deliver the answers. Their own grasp of Torah was insufficient. "The Torah teachers did not know me."

There was more. Their conduct was unbecoming that of Torah role models. "The leaders of the flock rebelled against me." Their observance was spotty. They were not meticulous in following the demands of halachah. They set a negative example for the people, rather a positive one.

So far, Yirmiyah has painted a dismal picture. The leaders failed in every possible way. We would think that nothing could be worse. Unfortunately, things could get worse – and they did. "The prophets prophesied in the name of Baal." The leaders in Yirmiya's generation failed in every manner in regard to safeguarding Torah in their times. They let the people down. They let Torah down. They let HKBH down.

They then took things to the next step. They had watched as a generation abandoned much of their commitment to Torah. In their weakened state, they were ripe for receiving substitutions for Torah truth. "The prophets prophesied in the name of Baal." The natural, proper leaders of the people had failed. They left a vacuum in which the nation was prepared to listen to other, foreign ideas.

New prophets arose – possibly different people, or possibly the same failed leaders, reinventing themselves on a new platform. They were more successful leading people actively astray, teaching them about Baal, i.e. about false and dangerous ideologies.

How often do we study the words of our *neviim* thousands of years ago, and see ourselves, as if in a mirror!

1. Based on HaMedrash V'HaMaaseh, Masei, by R. Yechezkel Lifshitz zt"l.
2. Yirmiyah 2:8 (in the *haftorah* of this parshah).