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Parshas Devarim

6th of Av 5784

The Strange Centrality of Leadership

In what was one of the greatest speeches in human history, exactly 37 days before his death, Moshe got up to address the Jewish people. Camped right on the border of Eretz Yisrael, the Jews were as close as they had ever been to finally entering the land they had waited 40 years for. Moshe, in his final opportunity to teach and inspire the nation he had so masterfully nurtured for the last four decades, gathered them all together, cleared his throat and addressed the entire people. The people leaned in, eager to hear what his parting words would be.

Moshe's first choice of topic seems a bit strange. The very first thing he spoke about was seemingly only applicable to less than one percent of the population, discussing laws regarding judges and leaders being fair and honest. "Leaders, wise and discerning, should lead you with impartiality and righteousness," Moshe admonished us (Devarim 1:15).

Now granted, proper leadership is an important topic, but is it more important than reminding us of the dangers of assimilating into the Canaanite culture? Is it more important than the reminder to focus on spiritual pursuits like building a Bais Hamikdash, and to prevent the material aspect of the land from taking dominance? Is it more important than reminding us not to forget about Hashem as we settle into the Land? Why was the reiteration of the importance of balanced and fair leadership and judgment the absolute first thing that Moshe imparted in his farewell speech?

We find a similar occurrence in the beginning of Pirkei Avos. Pirkei Avos, the authoritative guide book to the morals and ideals of a Torah life, does not begin with concepts like loving Hashem or kindness or the importance of prayer. The very first thing it begins with is the importance of judges to be patient while adjudicating judgment, as we see when it says "*Hevay Mesunim Badin*" (Pirkei Avos 1:1). It calls for leaders to think through their decisions before making them.

Why is that, of all things, what the official book of our morals and ideals begins with? Aren't there other ideas that would seem far more foundational?

Why Do We Refer to Our Gedolim by the Seforim They Wrote?

Let's take a step back for a moment. Ever wonder why the Jewish people often refer to their leaders by the books they wrote, and not by their actual names? If one would have gone to visit the Gerrer Rebbe, Rav Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter zt"l, one would have told the wagon driver to take him to the house of the Sfas Emes, for that is what he was called. Or when we talk about Rav Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz zt"l, or Rav Moshe Sofer zt"l, we call them the Chazon Ish and the Chasam Sofer. We say stories about the Pnei Yehoshua and the Noda B'Yehuda. We read about the passion of the Noam Elimelech and the Kedushas Levi. Isn't that a little strange? Why don't we refer to them by their names? No other group in society does this. We don't refer to Leo Tolstoy as "War and Peace". If we would meet J.K. Rowling on the street, we wouldn't run home and tell our friends that we saw Mrs. Harry Potter. So why do we do that with our leaders?

I was once giving a class to a group of college kids in Highland Park, and I asked them the following: If you were to walk into a bar and see your chemistry teacher completely drunk and engaged in a fistfight with someone, would you have any less respect for the material he teaches you the next day in class? They all replied in the negative. Then I asked them, were they to walk into a bar and see their rabbi drunk and engaged in a fistfight, would they respect the rabbi's Torah class less? They all answered yes.

What's the difference between these two scenarios?

The answer is that Torah is unlike any other subject in the world. Torah is transformative knowledge. It is knowledge and wisdom that is supposed to transform and uplift its learners and teachers. Even parts of Torah that are technical and procedural, like the laws of farming or the makeup of a cow's esophagus, have spiritual sparks embedded in them, which should elevate the learner to moral and ethical heights.

So, it stands to reason that a teacher of Torah who did not become elevated by what he is teaching is likely an unqualified teacher. The Torah's intrinsic holiness buried deep within it is meant to utterly transform and elevate those that allow their souls to tap into it.

The Name of Their Soul

Hence, our Torah leaders, who have devoted their entire lives to the holy books of Torah they authored, have become elevated by the books they wrote. Therefore, the very name of their book becomes synonymous with the name of the author, for it is, to some degree, the name of his soul.

A Jewish leader does far more than merely ensure that the general populace maintains peace and that no riots break out. A Jewish Torah leader elevates the entire Jewish nation by elevating himself. We look to our leaders as our connectors to God's Torah and ideals. If they are not balanced and righteous, they not only render the Torah into a mere subject, they threaten to derail the entire Jewish people. They guide us and prod us and show us the right way of life. If they don't live a life of fairness and humility, then how can we do so?

When Moshe looked at the Jews, poised and ready to enter the land, he knew all too well that if the leaders they would follow would be morally corrupt and unholy, the very bedrock of the nation would crumble. In order for the nation to flourish spiritually in the land of Israel, first and foremost, the most important thing was for the judges, leaders and teachers to be kind and patient and balanced and fair.

No matter how concretized a society seems, if the leaders on top are haughty, dishonest and corrupt, that society will crumble.

The Fall of Rome

A clear example of this is Ancient Rome. Ancient Rome was far more sophisticated than virtually any society that preceded it, and more sophisticated than almost any society that came after it for close to 1,000 years. They had a formal government with a congress and elections. They had complex aqueducts and running water and sewer systems. They had an army that conquered the entire known world. What went wrong? How did such a thing disintegrate? What caused the ruin of Rome? The answer is, good old-fashioned greed. When the great Diocletian died, a fight broke out amongst his two successors Maximinus and Flavius Severas. Before long, the lack of peace drove the Roman Empire, perhaps the most complex and accomplished world empire in all of human history, to an end.

If there is corruption and haughtiness at the top, there is little hope for the bottom.

That being said, there is still a puzzling point. If Moshe was calling attention to the importance of quality leadership, why did he address the entire people as a whole? Why not address just the leaders and future leaders?

Perhaps the answer is that there is no one in the Jewish people who is not, at least on a small level, a leader. Some people lead cities, some lead communities. Some lead schools while others lead sisterhoods. Some lead organizations and yet others lead households. Whether we're in a high-ranking position or not, we all lead our own personal lives. And leading a Torah lifestyle is completely incompatible with haughtiness, selfishness and unrighteousness. Leadership of any level requires humility and compassion and a heaping dose of selflessness.

The moment we stepped foot into Eretz Yisrael, we experienced a transformation from being sheep in Hashem's flock to leaders fighting battles, leaders building cities, leaders founding diverse communities, and leaders building families. In his address, Moshe pleaded with us to lead with balance and integrity, to be exemplary, and to recognize that our congregants, students, and children look up to us. For if we are selfish and dishonest, what hope is there for them?

The Leaders of Our Children

Each and every one of us is tasked with leading our precious children and implanting in them the Torah and what it stands for. The very first commandment in the Torah, *peru u'revu* (be fruitful and multiply), is not merely a mitzvah to have children and then drop them off somewhere and hope they make it in life. They are two distinct commandments: *peru* and *revu*.

The word *peru* comes from the word *pri*, or fruit. Just like fruit are abundant and plentiful, so are we charged to be abundant and plentiful. Then there is *revu*, which means to increase. Rav Shmshon Refael Hirsch zt"l explains that we are commanded to multiply our child, to expand him, to inject his life with meaning and spirit. We are charged with raising him in the literal sense of the word, from a life of mundane to a life of sanctity. If we are immoral and haughty, we are unqualified leaders of our own children.

Hence, Moshe began his speech by charging us to be humble, balanced, and patient. Likewise, *Pirkei Avos* begins with the need for our leaders to be patient. For if we fail at the top, we automatically fail on the bottom.

The "Great" Leaders of the Rest of the World

One need not look very far to find individuals who led the world, be it politically or culturally, who proved to be some of the lowest humans on earth. Some of the world's most famous philosophers, novelists, essayists, thinkers, writers, kings and emperors scraped the bottom of human society. Even religious institutions, like the churches and

mosques, were plagued for centuries with abuse, corruption and even outright moral decay. The most popular people on earth, the rock stars, the actors, the sports players, whom billions of people idolize and look up to, are often extremely subpar humans at best, and outright disgusting at worst. They are often caught in horrific scandals, and bounce in and out of jail. These are the decadent individuals who adorn the posters on the walls of youth around the world. We find this even closer to home as well, with politicians who drip with egotistical haughtiness, and business leaders who prey on powerless subordinates.

We, on the other hand, are lucky to look up to leaders who have morals and values. Leaders that virtually never think selfishly. Leaders that almost never put themselves first. Our children adorn their walls with pictures of people who are balanced and kind, and who encourage us to be caring, honest, humble, and righteous.

Moshe was not picked to lead the Jewish people because of his charisma and flair. As we know, he had a speech impediment that hindered every word he uttered. Rather, he was picked because he was a kind shepherd. He was picked because he was labeled by Hashem to be the humblest man on the face of the earth (Bamidbar 12:3).

Yehoshua was not picked to lead the Jewish people because of his good looks or oratory skills. The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabba 27:15) says that he was picked because he got up early to set up the benches of the room in which Moshe disseminated the Torah. It was his humility and care that propelled him to the role of leadership.

Our Leaders Are Special

The entire Halachic world follows the opinion of Bais Hillel over Bais Shamai. Not because they were smarter or because they displayed more intellectual prowess. We follow their lead because they were kinder and more patient than their counterparts (Eiruvim 13b).

The entire Ashkenazi Torah world follows the halachic leadership of a 16th century Polish scholar from the city of Cracow, named Rav Moshe Isserles (the Rema). He realized that Jewish law was too vast for the typical layman to learn in its entirety, so he began working on a book organizing and condensing it. Unbeknownst to him, at the exact same time, a Spanish scholar living in Tzfas named Rav Yosef Karo (the Bais Yosef, also referred to as "The Mechaber") was working on a similar book. Instead of publishing his own sefer and competing, as would have almost certainly occurred in any other arena in society with no compunctions, the Rema decided to allow the Bais Yosef to publish his book and condensed his own sefer to mere annotations of the Bais Yosef's. He displayed immense humility by giving up publishing his own

sefer, and accordingly, the name he chose to call his annotations summed up this tremendous middah best. While Rav Yosef Karo's book was called the Shulchan Aruch – "The Set Table" – while Rav Moshe Isserles called his annotations the Mappa – "The Tablecloth".

Our leaders are the ones who give us direction in our lives, nurturing and encouraging us. We, of course, look up to them from our youth as the ultimate role models in life, and we should be proud to claim such tremendous people as our leaders.

Harvard University: The Leader Factory

My family had a neighbor in Rochester named Gordon Lederman, who tragically died young of cancer. He was a brilliant fellow, he excelled in his studies and eventually got into Harvard University. He was one of the only Orthodox Jews on campus, and he knew he was different. But it didn't bother him; in fact, he was proud of it.

Harvard has a custom that every freshman delivers a short speech at the beginning of the year about an individual who inspires them. With the room filled to capacity, each freshman gets up and talks about a figure they look up to. One student talked about how he idolized John F. Kennedy. Another talked about Michael Jordan. After the crowd heard all about Bill Gates, Walt Disney, Martin Luther King Jr., Marilyn Monroe, Edgar J. Hoover, Fidel Castro and Henry Ford, it was finally Gordon's turn. He got up and scanned the room. Being the only religious Jew present, in a room filled with the world's future politicians, CEOs and Supreme Court judges, he was acutely conscious of the attention on him as he began to speak.

Gordon cleared his throat and began:

"I would like to talk about a man whom no one in this room has heard of. He lived in utter poverty in a little town in Europe that no one here has ever been to. And yet, he led millions upon millions of people throughout his lifetime. His writings have been taught in every corner of the globe and has sold more copies than some of the world's best novelists. He had some of the smartest people on earth clamoring to get even a few words with him. His opinion was sought in virtually every area of life, from the deepest most esoteric spiritual concepts to global political strategies.

"He was known by millions of people throughout the world as the greatest sage on the face of the earth. He had a steady stream of people waiting to talk to him for the duration of the day, for the greater part of the over one

hundred years of his life. He would give as much attention to a foreign diplomat or governor as he would to the crying widow who had nothing to eat.

“He was enormously scrupulous never to speak even a word of gossip, and started a campaign to eradicate gossip on a global scale. He humbly led millions of people in the proper path in life, leading by example. He was the very definition of kindness, loving and caring. Despite having millions of people looking up to him as their leader, he lived in a one room house with a dirt floor. Despite advising and guiding some of the wealthiest people on earth, he could almost count his worldly possessions on both hands. This man was quite possibly the most selfless and humble man on the planet. This man you’ve never heard of was referred to as the Chofetz Chaim, the global leader of the Jewish people, and he is my inspiration.”

With that, Gordon looked at the stunned audience, frozen in silence, and returned to his seat.