

Hybrid Leadership?

Category: Bamidbar, Pinchas

Who should be Moses's successor - his son or his disciple?

The Big News

This week, a new major political drama unfolded. The president was expected to run for a second term, but withdrew his candidacy and passed the leadership of his party to his vice president.

The Rebbe taught us to always find meaning in current events, so let's look for similar instances in Torah. Well, it turns out that this historic moment has a precedent too; it already took place on several occasions in Jewish history, and in the most heroic account, in a Chassidic history.

Everyone knows about Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic movement, who lived three hundred years ago. He famously breathed new life into thousands of Jews during a difficult and discouraging time. He brought them joy and vitality in their service to G-d.

He was the first to tell simple Jews that G-d loves them like a father loves an only son born in his old age. He told them that G-d cherishes every mitzvah they perform, and His greatest pleasure is seeing a Jew doing a kind act for a fellow Jew.

Well, on Shavuot 1760 the Baal Shem Tov passed away, leaving a young movement bereft of leadership in a moment where they faced strong opposition. All the disciples decided to appoint his son, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch, as the leader of the community.

That year was very difficult for the Chassidim. The new Rebbe Rabbi Tzvi was quiet and introverted, and didn't seem to have the wherewithal to lead the new Chassidic brotherhood. The Chassidim were deeply concerned about the future of their movement.

On the first anniversary of the Baal Shem Tov's passing, on Shavuot the next year,

all the great disciples gathered to commemorate their Rebbe's first yahrzeit. They sat around a long table, with Rabbi Tzvi, the Baal Shem Tov's son, at the head, dressed in his father's rabbinical garments.

Suddenly, Rabbi Tzvi stood up and said, "Today my holy father came to me and informed me that the 'heavenly entourage' that used to accompany him has now passed to our holy colleague, Rabbi Dovber. My father told me to pass the leadership to him in the presence of the entire 'holy brotherhood'; "he will sit at the head of the table, and you, my son, will sit in his place!" The Baal Shem Tov concluded the vision with the words, "And you will be successful." With that, Rabbi Tzvi turned to Rabbi Dovber, congratulated him, gave him his rabbinic coat, and sat in his place.

Rabbi Dov Ber sat at the head of the table, and the disciples all stood up to listen to the first discourse that the new Rebbe was about to deliver (Sefer HaToldot, The Maggid of Mezritch, p. 23).

This act of humility changed everything for the future of the Chassidic movement. Rabbi Dovber, known to the world as the Maggid of Mezritch, was a great Torah scholar and a charismatic leader. It was he who transformed Chassidus into a movement that captivated the masses.

When the Rebbe Rashab told this story, he noted that giving up leadership requires extraordinary strength. He pointed out that in Jewish history, we have many who *initially* refused positions of authority and even fled from them. However, to relinquish leadership after already attaining it, voluntarily and without any external pressure, one needs to possess special powers. (Torat Shalom, p. 84).

In fact, there is a statement in the Talmud that refers to exactly this point: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachiah said, "At first, anyone who suggested that I assume a position of leadership, I would bind him and place him before a lion. Now, anyone who tells me to step down, I pour boiling water on him" (Menachot 109b).

The Request From Moses

Interestingly, we also find the theme of leadership in this week's Torah portion. In the middle of Parshat Pinchas, G-d tells Moses to ascend the mountain and view

the Promised Land—the land to which he led the Jewish people, but which he would not enter. Soon it would come time for him to leave this world. Then something very unusual happens: Moses addresses G-d instead of G-d addressing Moses. Instead of the usual “And G-d spoke to Moses,” the verse reads, “And Moses spoke to G-d, saying” (Numbers 27:15). Moses makes a request: he asks G-d to appoint a new leader to take his place.

What was behind Moses’ request? Rashi explains that Moses thought it was time for his sons to inherit his greatness. Moses saw how Aaron’s son inherited the High Priesthood, and he desired the same for his own children. However, G-d responded, “This is not what I intended; Joshua is worthy to receive the reward for his service, for he never left the tent” (Numbers 27:16). The Midrash elaborates, “Your sons sat idle and did not engage in Torah, but Joshua served you with all his strength; therefore, he is fit to lead Israel.”

The story is very interesting, but the Rebbe pointed out that Moses’ question seems unbecoming. If he knew that his sons indeed sat idle and did not engage in Torah study, why did he consider them to inherit his position?

Perhaps, the Rebbe said, Moses did not intend for his sons to be appointed as “Chief Rabbi” in his own image, the one who would teach Torah to the people. Rather, he envisioned them as taking over his other role, that of “king”—the leaders who would lead them in battle. The Israelites were about to enter the land of Israel and would need to conquer it, so the next leader had to be a warrior. In monarchies, inheritance is common, and Moses wanted his sons to inherit *that* position.

Perhaps Moses wanted there to be two leaders: one who would serve as the chief rabbi, teaching them Torah and serving as a spiritual leader, and another who would be the king, leading them in wars and the conquest of the land.

That’s actually how most of Jewish history played out: there was a king, the leader from a material perspective, and a nasi (prince) or head of the court, the spiritual leader of the Jewish people. For example, King Hezekiah of Judah was a righteous king, but there was also the prophet Isaiah, who was the spiritual leader.

Moses wanted the same arrangement: he knew his sons were not fit for spiritual leadership, but they could inherit kingship from him. Joshua would be the spiritual leader, and one of his sons would be the king.

However, G-d preferred a single leader, just as Moses embodied both roles—being a Spiritual leader and a king in battles. Moses was a sole ruler, and so too was Joshua (Likutei Sichos vol. 23, p. 191 onward).

Joshua was unique in the fact that he was considered a direct continuation of Moses. Despite the split in the leadership in later generations, Joshua was able to lead in the same way Moses did. The Talmud says that “The face of Moses was like the sun; the face of Joshua was like the moon” (Bava Batra 75a). In other words, just as the moon has no light of its own but reflects the sun’s light, Joshua was a reflection of Moses. According to the sages, until the end of Joshua’s days, it was still considered under Moses’ leadership. The Rebbe brings from Rashi on the Torah that “as long as Joshua was alive, it was as if Moses was alive.” (Toras Menachem vol. 45, p. 40).

The ‘Split’ In Our Lives

Now, Joshua is not the only one compared to the moon. The Jewish people are compared to the moon as well. Therefore, the Jewish calendar is based on the lunar year, which has 12 months and a total of 354 days, unlike the solar year, which has 365 days.

Why are we compared to the moon? One explanation is that the Jewish people are a reflection of G-d. When the world looks at a Jew, it seeks to find G-dliness in their behavior. When the world looks into a Jew’s eyes, it wants to see a spark of the Divine presence within.

Now, sometimes, we also try to divide our lives into two parts: king and spiritual leader.

The 613 mitzvot are divided into two categories: mitzvot between a person and G-d, and mitzvot between a person and their fellow. For example, putting on tefillin is a mitzvah between a person and G-d, as are brit milah, Shabbat, and kashrut. On the other hand, there are mitzvot between a person and their fellow, such as charity, visiting the sick, refraining from gossip, and, of course, not stealing, robbing, or lying.

Some Jews love to make this division. There are those who pray and study Torah, keep Shabbos etc. but when it comes to business and commerce, they are not so

honest. They cut corners, tell white lies, and do not always keep their word. Yet, they still feel good about themselves, as they are strict about mitzvot between a person and G-d, like praying with a minyan.

On the other hand, there are Jews who are as straight as a ruler. They would never lie or cheat. They help others, give charity, and volunteer for every mitzvah. However, they say, “Tefillin? That’s not for me,” and “Prayers bore me.” As someone recently told me, for him, going to synagogue is like going to the dentist—it’s painful and he has to pay for it.

Our parsha teaches us that everyone needs both. There are enough hours in the day to fulfill both mitzvot between a person and G-d, and mitzvot between a person and their fellow. In fact, they complement each other. If we really put ourselves to it, we will discover that the synagogue is not a dental clinic, but the most interesting club in town..