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Today's Torah

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Shabbat Parashat Pi'nehas
July 7, 2018 – 24 Tammuz 5778



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Pi'nehas Leadership

Torah Reading: Numbers 25:10 – 30:1

Haftarah Reading: Jeremiah 1:1 -2:3

For the last ten or fifteen years of his life, it seemed like my father, Murray Friedman z"l, was constantly on a search committee. Each search demanded a lot of time, attention, and effort, but I understood why he kept saying "yes." From his career in the corporate world to his service on the boards of Camp Ramah Darom, the Weber School, and other organizations, he had devoted his life to cultivating qualities of leadership in himself and others. His keen sense of the right person for the job in question was one of his offerings in service to the Jewish community, and he approached the work with joy and passion each time. I naturally thought of him right away when I encountered a midrash on this week's parashah, Parashat Pinhas, that I had never seen before.

Our Torah portion brings us close to the end of the Torah's saga, the waning days of Moses' leadership. As we approach the bittersweet conclusion, Midrash Tanhuma (Pinhas 10) imagines Moses' final conversation with God:

"At the time of his death, Moses asked of the Holy Blessed One: "Master of the World, each person's thoughts are revealed and known to You, and not one of Your children is like another. When I leave them, I ask of you, if you seek to appoint a leader over them, appoint a person who can bear each of them appropriate to their thoughts." How do we know this? As is stated in this matter (Numbers 27:16): Let the

LORD, Source of the breath of all flesh, [appoint someone over the community who shall go out before them and come in before them, and who shall take them out and bring them in, so that the LORD's community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd.]”

It might seem self-evident at first – who doesn't realize how different one person can be from another? – but as a criterion for leadership, Moses' request is far from obvious. After he dies, the Israelites will need to cross the Jordan, conquer the land of Israel, and establish a stable society. Any one of these is a tall order for a communal leader. And yet Moses seems unconcerned about logistical capabilities, military prowess, or political craft. Instead, he focuses on a personal quality of the new leader: his sensitivity to the individual needs, abilities, and insights of the people he will lead.

While I doubt my father ever saw this particular midrash, I am certain he would have recognized its fundamental truth. Leadership is, by definition, a social role; it brings a person into near-constant contact with other people. Moreover, we often find ourselves needing to lead even when we're not invested with a formal position of authority. Each of us has someone who looks to us for advice and guidance, who relies on us to show the way – at work, in a family, and in our friendships. Despite popular perception, the best leaders are more likely to be stewards or shepherds – in fact, Moses' original profession – than hard-charging strongmen. The midrash highlights this quality because it offers valuable insight for all of us.

From my early years at Camp Ramah in New England all the way through my time as a junior rabbi at Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago, I have been blessed with counselors, mentors, and supervisors who understood Moses' insight: each person we lead, whether on a staff, a sports team, a scout troop, or a community, brings a unique perspective. Effective leadership demands that we lead according to their needs rather than our own preferences. I am grateful for the many life-teachers who modeled how a leader tends to each individual, and I feel especially blessed to have had a father who, as a parent as well as a business and communal leader, lived by this principle each day.

Rabbi Abe Friedman is Senior Rabbi of Temple Beth Zion-Beth Israel in Center City, Philadelphia. He found his love of Jewish community as a camper, counselor, and Rosh Edah (Division Head) at Camp Ramah in Palmer, Massachusetts. His rabbinic work focuses on community engagement, Jewish learning, and spiritual counseling, and he expresses his love of music through electric guitar, piano and the occasional DJ set. Rabbi Abe and his wife, Rebecca Krasner, are the proud, amused, and tired parents of Odelia, Azriel, and Yonah. Rabbi Abe joined BZBI in 2015 after serving for five years as a rabbi at Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago. He also serves as a member of the Executive Committee of the Board of Rabbis of Greater Philadelphia. A native of Atlanta, Georgia, Rabbi Abe lived in Israel for a year as part of USY's Nativ Leadership Program before attending Boston University. He received his rabbinic ordination from the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at Los Angeles' American Jewish University, where he also earned an MBA in Nonprofit Management.



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