

PARASHAS PINCHAS

No Little Things

What is the image that comes to mind when we think of the ideal national leader? Someone who has a grasp of the issues, who can see the big picture. Someone who is strong and courageous, who can hold his own in the arena of international affairs in times of war and peace. Someone who has a vision for the future and the ability to make it happen. Someone who, through his words and actions, can inspire and galvanize his people.

But in this week's Torah portion we find an altogether different measure of leadership. As the Jewish people approach the Promised Land, Hashem appoints Joshua as the successor to Moses. And what is his qualification for leadership? That he is attuned to the spirit of each and every individual Jew.

The commentators explain that this is the overriding quality required of a leader. It is not enough for a leader to have grand schemes and plans. It is not enough for a leader to deliver soul-stirring addresses to the people. A leader must be able to relate to his people on every level. He must be sensitive to their needs and aspiration. He must empathize with their pain and joy. A true leader cannot stand off in the distance. He must be thoroughly attuned to the most minor requirements of his people in order to lead effectively. For a true leader, there are no little things.

For forty years, Moses had fulfilled this role. During all this time, as he enjoyed daily prophetic encounters with Hashem, Moses was constantly growing in holiness until he reached a point where he was, according to the Midrash, half human, half angel. Even so, whenever the people had challenged the divine will, he had fathomed their motivations and defended them. Even as he ascended from the mundane to the celestial, the gulf between him and his people had never widened to the point where he could not relate to them. Now that it was time for a change in leadership, Hashem chose Joshua who also excelled in his sensitivity to the nuances of each individual's spirit. This was the fundamental quality that Hashem wanted for a Jewish leader.

A revolutionary general was trying to revive the fighting spirit of his trapped and starving guerillas. "If we can fight our way out of this corner," he announced, "I will issue a large bonus to each man. You will have enough money to buy all the bread and meat and fruits and vegetables you need to recover your strength."

The guerillas responded to the promise. They fought like tigers and were able to break out and get away. As soon as they got to safer territory, the general, true to his word, awarded each man his bonus.

The next day, the one of the general's aides stormed into his tent. "Sir, a whole group of the men took their bonus money and wasted it!"

"Indeed?" said the general. "And what did they do?"

"Instead of buying food to rebuild their strength," the aide said furiously, "they spent all their money on tiny tins of caviar!"

The general stroked his chin thoughtfully for a few moments. "Thank you for telling me this," he said to his aide. "It is important information. This caviar must have been very important to them if they would spend all their money on it even when they are starving and exhausted. Apparently, the men need occasional splurges of luxury to help them deal with the tensions of battle. I will make sure to provide it for them in the future."

In our own lives, as we seek to grow spiritually, we must never lose sight of the physical needs of those around us. A great sage once said, "My spiritual need is to serve the physical needs of others." There is profound spiritual fulfillment in bringing comfort and happiness to other people, even on the physical level. But in order to do so, we must be extremely sensitive and attuned, for as people are different from each other so are their needs.