

Parashat Pinhas begins by completing the episode which began in *Parashat Balak*: Pinhas had ended the plague that was devastating the Israelites while they were seduced into idolatry by the Moabite and Midianite women. Pinhas' reward for his zealotry was a "covenant of peace" (Num. 25:12) and "lasting priesthood" (25:13).

The *parasha* then moves on to the second census in the book, this time of the new generation that would enter the land. There then follow two narratives, one about the daughters of Tzlofhad and God's positive reply to their request for a share in the land, the second about Moses' request that God appoint a successor. The *parasha* ends with two chapters about the sacrifices to be brought at different times, daily, weekly, monthly, and on festivals.

The first of the essays looks at Judaism's understanding of the zealot, typified by Pinhas and in a later age by the prophet Elijah. The second analyses why the act of a zealot cannot serve as the basis for a general rule of conduct. The third is about an unusual feature of the Torah text at the beginning of chapter 26, immediately prior to the census. It contains a *piska be'emtza pasuk*, a chapter break in the middle of a sentence. I argue that this is a kind of audible silence in the narrative, marking a point at which words fail. The fourth asks whether a positive message may be inferred from the fact that Moses was unable to hand on his leadership role to either of his sons. The fifth suggests some of the leadership lessons to be learned from the narrative in which Joshua is chosen as Moses' successor. **The sixth analyses an apparently redundant text from which, I argue, an important leadership principle can be inferred.**

*Leadership and the Art of Pacing*¹

There are three kinds of Torah: the Torah we learn from books, the Torah we learn from teachers, and the Torah we learn from life. The first two are straightforward. That is how most of us learn. But the third can sometimes be the deepest and most personal. We learn because **something happens to us or through us that gives us a new insight into what the Torah is trying to teach us to see.**

In my own years as a leader, there was one phrase in *Parashat Pinhas* I only understood through the experience of leadership itself. It appears in the course of Moses' request of God that He designate his successor. He said:

May the Lord, God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint someone over this community *who will go out before them and come in before them, who*

will lead them out and bring them in. Let the Lord's people not be like sheep without a shepherd. (Num. 27:16-17)

The italicised words seem to be saying the same thing twice. Why the repetition? The meaning of the first phrase, "who will go out before them and come in before them," is clear. It means **one who will lead from the front**, who will not send his people into battle while staying behind in safety himself. Rashi quotes a verse (1Sam. 18:16) in which the Torah says: "All Israel and Judah loved David because he went out and came back in front of them." The watchword of Israel's leaders has always been *Acharai*, "After me."

1. 1Samuel 18:12-16

¹⁶But **all Israel and Judah loved David, because he led them in their campaigns.**

JPS—for **he went out and came in before them.**

KJV—because **he went out and came in before them.**

LXX—because **he came in and went out before the people.**

NAS—and **he went out and came in before them.**

2. As someone who has participated in operations and has been wounded, I can say that the **commanders see themselves first and foremost as soldiers in the lead.** In their eyes, **the best place for them to be is at the front of their troops.** There is risk involved, but **the blood of a lieutenant colonel is not more valuable than the blood of a sergeant.** They are both just as valuable as each other. This style of command produces the best mission performance and imbues the fighters with optimal confidence—Maj. Gen. (ret.) Uzi Dayan²

It is the second phrase that is difficult: "who will lead them out and bring them in." Surely that follows from the first without saying anything new. Rashi is forced to offer two different explanations. One is that it means, "who will lead them [to victory] *through his merits.*" This is a possible reading but it is not the plain sense of the verse.⁽¹⁾ The other is sardonic. Moses, says Rashi, was protesting to God: "Do not do to my successor what You did to me, denying me the chance to lead the people into the land."⁽²⁾ Let Joshua, unlike me, reach his destination. This is very striking, but even less the plain sense of the verse.

Thus far Rashi. But there is another interpretation—**one I only discovered through the life of leadership itself. A leader must indeed lead from the front.** But **he or she must also understand the pace at which people can go.** Leadership is not effective *if leaders are so far ahead of those they lead that when they turn their heads round, they discover that there is no one following.* **Leaders must go out in front and come back in front. But they must also "lead the people out and bring them back,"**

¹ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Numbers*, (Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union), pp. 355-360.

² <https://www.israelhayom.com/opinions/the-commanders-lead-from-the-front/>

meaning, they must take people with them. They must make sure that the people are keeping up with them. They must pace the challenge.

Moses discovered this through the episode of the spies. He was ready to enter the Promised Land. So were two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb. But the rest of the people were not, including ten of the spies. For them it was too much, too soon. The spies raised doubts. The people despaired. Some regretted the fact that they had ever left Egypt. We recall Maimonides' explanation in *Guide for the Perplexed* that **human nature changes at best gradually, never suddenly.**⁽³⁾ **It proved too much to expect that a generation born in slavery would be able to fight the battle of freedom.** It would take forty years—an entire generation. Their children, born in freedom and toughened by the experience of the desert, would have the strength their parents lacked.

Recall, though, what happened next. No sooner had Moses told the people of the forty-year delay than they regretted their reaction and wanted to begin the conquest of the land immediately. Moses warned them it would end in disaster, but they refused to listen:

Early the next morning, [the people] began climbing towards the top of the hill, declaring, "We are now ready! We shall go forwards to the place that God described. We [admit that] we were mistaken." "Why are you going against God's word?" said Moses. "It will not work! Do not proceed; God is not with you. Do not be killed by your enemies!"... [But **the people**] **defiantly climbed towards the top of the hill**, though neither the Ark of God's covenant nor Moses moved from the camp. The Amalekites and Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and defeated [the Israelites], pursuing them with crushing force all the way to Hormah. (Num. 14:40-45)

First the people thought the conquest could not be done at all, then they thought it could be done immediately. **What they lacked was a sense of pace and timing.** They failed to understand how much preparation, mental and physical, would be needed. It was this experience, I suspect, that lay behind Moses' twofold request. He asked God to appoint a successor who would lead from the front, **but who would also understand that he had to go at a speed at which the people could keep up with him.**"

3. Colossians 3:12-17

¹²Therefore, as **God's chosen people**, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience ... ¹⁴And over all these virtues put on love, **which binds them all together in perfect unity.**

a. Hebrews 11:39-40

³⁹These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, ⁴⁰since God had planned some-

thing better for us so that **only together with us would they be made perfect.**

b. Hebrews 6:1-3

¹Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Messiah **and be taken forward to maturity ...**

c. Galatians 6:2

²**Carry each other's burdens**, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Messiah.

1) **βάρος** (*baros*)—heaviness, weight, burden, trouble

Not all forms of leadership require this. The great prophets were often centuries ahead of their time. That is what made them prophets. It is also the reason that they were often unheeded during their lifetime. Today we still find the words of Amos and Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah, challenging. They saw the far horizon, but to their contemporaries it was too distant, a destination too remote, a mountain too high to climb.

There are secular examples. The great artists were often ahead of their time. Beethoven's late quartets were almost unintelligible for a century. The first Impressionist exhibition was panned by the critics. Van Gogh sold only one painting in his lifetime. The audience at the first performance of Stravinsky's Rite of Spring expressed their disapproval with catcalls and whistles.

An artist may be ahead of his time; a prophet must be ahead of his time. But they are not leaders of people. They are leaders of ideas. Often they are reclusive. Only a few of their contemporaries understand what they are trying to do, but that is enough for them. Eventually, long after their lifetime, their ideas penetrate a wider circle. But **a leader to follow Moses and lead the people across the Jordan and into the land had to be able to connect with people.** That is why Moses prayed to God for a successor who would go out in front—**but not too far, too fast.**

4. 1 Samuel 2:26

²⁶And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the LORD **and with people.**

a. Luke 2:52

⁵²And Yeshua grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God **and man.**

God chose Joshua, a man who had served Moses faithfully throughout, and who had led the people into battle against the Amalekites after the crossing of the Red Sea. **Joshua was not another Moses.** As we noted earlier, the sages said that "the face of Moses was like the sun, while that of Joshua was like the moon" (Bava Batra 75a). In fact, as the Torah says explicitly, there never was another Moses (Deut. 34:10-12). However, that is precisely why Joshua was the right leader for the next generation.

5. Reb Zusha³ told his students: When I come to Heaven and they ask me "Why weren't you **like** Abraham our forefather?" I will answer: "because I wasn't Abraham." If they inquire: "Why didn't you match the greatness of Moses?" I can answer that I wasn't Moses. Even if they try to compare me to my brother Reb Elimelech, I can still say that I wasn't Elimelech. However, if they ask me why I wasn't the way Zusha needed to be ... to that I have no answer.

a. 1Corinthians 7:7

¹I wish that all of you were as I am. But **each of you has your own gift from God**; one has this gift, another has that.

Moses was the archetype of the strong leader, the man who—with God's help—did it all. It was he who confronted Pharaoh, led the people out of Egypt, took them through the sea, and led them to Mount Sinai. He was the voice of God to the people, and the voice of the people when he prayed to God. Strong leaders make history. Books are written about them. Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1840)⁽⁴⁾ is the classic text on the "great man" theory of leadership: history is made by rare, inspired individuals capable of moving people from their accustomed orbit into a new trajectory. That, translated into Judaic terms, is what Moses was.

But great individuals do not necessarily turn those they lead into great individuals. Like the sun, they burn too brightly for others to be able to see them face to face. This was literally so in the case of Moses. When he came down from the mountain with the second set of tablets, the Torah says, "he was not aware that his face was radiant" because he had spoken with God (Ex. 34:29-35). Thereafter he had to wear a veil because people were fearful of looking at him directly.

6. Exodus 34:29 (NAS)

²⁹Moses did not know that the skin of **his face shone** because of his speaking with Him ...

a. 2Corinthians 3:7-11 (CJB)

⁷Now if that which worked death, by means of a written text engraved on stone tablets, **came with glory**—such glory that **the people of Isra'el could not stand to look at Moshe's face because of its brightness**, even though that brightness was already fading away—⁸won't the working of the Spirit be accompanied by even greater glory? ⁹For **if there was glory in what worked to declare**

people guilty, how much more must the glory abound in what works to declare people innocent!

b. Matthew 17:1-3

²There (Yeshua) was transfigured before them. **His face shone like the sun**, and his clothes became as white as the light.

c. Revelation 10:1-7

¹Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven. He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; **his face was like the sun**, and his legs were like fiery pillars.

When people are led by "great men," they can easily become passive, dependent, lacking in a sense of personal and collective responsibility. When there is a crisis, they expect the leader to deal with it. They do not expect him or her to challenge them to do it themselves. Moses' greatness, never subsequently repeated, was both good news and bad. **Without his strength the people would never have left Egypt, but dependent on his strength they would never develop the independence they needed to conquer the land.**

It was precisely because Joshua was like the moon to Moses' sun that he was the right leader for the next generation. He left space for people to fill, room for them to grow. **Because they had to shoulder responsibilities, they acquired a sense of timing and pace.** Throughout Joshua's leadership the people never complained that he was going too fast or too slow.

A leader must have vision, but also realism. He or she must think the impossible but know the possible. Because leaders are often figures of great ability, they can sometimes forget that not everyone can travel as fast as they can. **A leader can be too far ahead of his or her time. People are slow to change, and a leader who understands the need for change may try to force the pace faster than the people can go.**

That is why some of the greatest leaders—Lincoln, Gandhi, John F. and Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., Anwar Sadat, Yitzhak Rabin—were assassinated. **In retrospect they are seen as heroes. But at the time, they were often regarded as traitors, betrayers.** They forced people out of their comfort zone, usually by trying to turn enemies into friends. They were driving people faster than they could go. There were times when Moses himself feared for his life.⁽⁵⁾ That is what Moses was saying. Let the Israelites be led by one who will "go out before them and come in before them," leading from the front—but also one who will "lead them out and bring them in," meaning one who will carry the people with him, not going so fast that they cannot keep up.

³ Rabbi Meshulam Zusha of Anipoli (1718–1800) was an Orthodox rabbi and an early Hasidic luminary. He was one of the great Hassidic Rebbes of the third generation and member of the academy circle of the Maggid of Mezeritch. He was a well known tzaddik and the brother of Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk. Rabbi Elimelech was about 5 years older than Rabbi Meshulam Zusha.

A leader of the people must go at the people's pace. He or she must educate them, prepare them for the challenges ahead, listen to their grievances, give them courage, lift their sights, and be prepared to slow down if they are unable to accelerate. He or she must be impatient and patient all at once—a difficult balancing act. But there is no choice. Leaders must not go on ahead so far and fast that, nearing their destination, they find themselves alone.

(1) Rashi is quoting from Sifre ad loc (“at the place”).

(2) The source is *Midrash Yelamdenu* (i.e., *Midrash Tanhuma*, Buber) ad loc.

(3) Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, III:32.

(4) London: Cassell, 1908.

(5) See, e.g., Ex. 17:4.