

Parshas Shemini – Leadership - Simcha Handley

כ"ט ניסן תשע"ה – 17 April 2015 – שבת פי' שמיני

This week we read of the tragic death of Nadav and Abihu, the two oldest sons of Aharon Hacoen. The commentators give several reasons why they should have died: they wanted to make use of sacrificial methods that existed before the Torah was given (Josephus), or else they were under the influence of drink (Rabbi Yishmael), or they brought their own incense into the Kadosh Kadoshim (Sifra), or it was because they acted alone without consulting their elders and teachers (Sifra and Rabbi Eliezer; Yoma 53a). In any event, they did not make the cut as leaders of the Jewish people. This causes me to reflect on the nature of leadership.

The paradigm of leadership in the Jewish community is that of the Rebbe and the Chasidim. It was perfectly normal in Chasidic circles for the Rebbe's followers to gather round the Rebbe and observe him doing quite secular activities, such as drinking a cup of tea, because deep spiritual examples can be derived by so doing. It is argued that you can always project a good image when you are giving a dvar Torah or leading the prayers, but once your guard is down, you are doing something mundane, and you are no longer "on show", your true self will come out.

The story is told that when Shabbetai Zvi began to be well known, some talmidei chachamim were sent to observe him to see if he was really who he said he was. They managed to watch him when he was asleep, and noted that he slept on his stomach. They therefore concluded that he could not be genuine; apparently, it is against halachah to sleep on your stomach. Before we all start worrying about our own sleep patterns, it is inevitable that ordinary individuals such as you and me will end up sleeping in the "wrong" position purely by accident. However, if you are as holy as Shabbetai Zvi claimed to be, you will be so much in control of yourself that even your unconscious acts will be subject to the Divine will.

When I lived in Stamford Hill, I would sometimes find myself walking behind the Rabbi on the way to shul, and I would observe that he made a point of saying "good morning" to everyone, of all backgrounds, en route. I need hardly say that he didn't do it to impress me or anyone else in the congregation. He did it because he was genuinely friendly. It did wonders for bringing people of different faiths together. Moreover, it gave me confidence. I would happily walk the grubby streets of Hackney in my Shabbat best saying to myself, "I am a talmid of Rabbi who everyone knows, and all will be well", and it was so.

Rav Feinstein used to say that you could tell a truly righteous person by the manner in which he walked, because such a person would never push someone else out of the way. Eminent actors agree that you cannot be sure that you will portray properly the character you are playing until you have determined how that character will walk.

This also works in reverse. If you become truly mindful of how you are conducting yourself, it will lead to conscious changes in daily behaviour. My mother used to tell me about classes in what was called "deportment" that young women in her day would attend, in which one of the exercises was to walk round the room with a pile of books balanced on your head. The idea of these classes was that if you take your carriage seriously, you will therefore take due care of other aspects of behaviour. The aim was to create a virtuous circle in which mindfulness leads to good conduct, and good conduct leads to more mindfulness, and so forth.

It was said of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe that before he became the Rebbe he would receive letters from his father in law, the previous Rebbe, and he would read them with intense concentration. This is to teach that if you want to become a great leader, you must first be a great disciple. Besides, given that the subject of the letters may have been highly sensitive, every word had to be weighed very carefully. The choice of one word when two may have been better for style of writing, or two words where one would have done, could have hinted at an important communal issue. Such a hint would have been missed without careful reading. We cannot over-estimate how important it is to understand how the reader may react to what we have written.

As it is said in Pirke Avot, "Reflect upon three things, and thou wilt not come within the power of sin: know what is above thee – a seeing eye, and a hearing ear, and all thy deeds written in a book." (Chapter 2, verse 1.)

This is written with grateful acknowledgement to Rabbi Pick with whom I discussed some of the above.