Think Carefully, Then Speak: Thoughts for Shabbat April 17, 2010

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The Talmud (Gittin 67A) reports a conversation between Rabbi Yehuda haNasi (the great compiler of the Mishna) and his son Rabbi Shimon. The rabbis had established a hierarchy of authorities; in case of disagreements, the opinions of certain sages were considered more authoritative than the opinons of their colleagues. The sage who usually prevailed was Rabbi Yosei. Rabbi Shimon asked his father: why do we rule according to Rabbi Yosei, when some of his colleagues were known to be more incisive?

Rabbi Yehuda haNasi replied: Quiet, my son, quiet. You did not see Rabbi Yosei. If you had seen him, you would know that when he spoke, he spoke cogently.

Rabbi Binyamin Lau, in volume 3 (p. 105) of his wonderful series on "Hakhamim", elaborates on the special quality of Rabbi Yosei. Throughout his life, Rabbi Yosei demonstrated the wisdom of listening to and evaluating opposing arguments. He saw the various sides to each question and tried to find ways of harmonizing dissenting views. He was not afraid to remain silent or to say that he did not know the answer. Because he thought so carefully before giving his rulings, his colleagues learned to respect his opinion above all others. His leadership did not come because he forced his views on others, and not because he was the most brilliant or learned scholar; his leadership emerged from his ability to judge quietly, fairly, and reasonably. His humility and his calm even-handedness prevailed over the flashier and noisier views of others.

In the Torah portion, Metsora, we are told that if a person discovers a certain plague on a wall of his house, he is supposed to go to the Cohen and report: "there seems to be a plague in my house." Rashi comments: even if the home-owner is a great scholar and knows for a fact that this plague is of the impure type (metsora), he is still supposed to present the issue to the Cohen: "there seems to be a plague". He is not supposed to make the ruling on his own, but should consult the Cohen--and the Cohen will decide.

Although the case relating to metsora is quite specific, the larger lesson is that one should not make snap decisions on his/her
own, but should offer opinions tentatively--and not be afraid to consult with

others. One should think things through, weigh the opinions of respected associates, make decisions in a balanced and well-reasoned fashion.

Quiet thoughtfulness is not a sign of weakness, but a source of strength. Listening to the ideas of others is not a shortcoming for leaders, but a necessity for proper leadership. Rabbi Yosei's opinions became authoritative because they were cogent. From his example we learn: think first, then speak.

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Angel for Shabbat