Shepherds for Our Communities: Thoughts on Parashat Pinchas, July 11, 2015

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When Moses approached the end of his career, he asked God to appoint a new leader for the Israelites, so that "the congregation of the Lord be not as sheep which have no shepherd" (Bemidbar 27:17). He wanted to be sure that his successor would be someone who would lead the people as a shepherd who tends his flock.

A shepherd is often lonely. A shepherd often loses sleep. A shepherd watches over the entire flock, especially the weaker sheep and the stragglers. A shepherd keeps the flock in order, making sure that all are accounted for. A shepherd leads the flock with thoughtfulness and devotion.

A shepherd fails if he can't keep the flock in a harmonious framework. He fails if he favors the strong sheep and ignores the weaker ones. He fails if he does not look out for the welfare of the flock, but places his own personal needs before theirs.

A good shepherd is strong enough to maintain control, and gentle enough to be sensitive to the needs of each member of the flock.

To be a shepherd of sheep is challenging. To be a shepherd of a community of people is far more challenging. Moses knew from experience how difficult it was to shepherd the Israelites. His plea to God was for a successor who could lead the people effectively, honorably and harmoniously.

Moses wanted the Israelites to have a leader who would emulate the best qualities of a shepherd.

An article by Professor Christine Porath (New York Times, June 21, 2015) discusses key research on the nature of effective leadership. She notes how incivility in the work place leads to demoralization and to a decline in quality of productivity. A survey of 4500 doctors, nurses and other hospital personnel, found that 71% tied medical errors to abusive, condescending or insulting conduct by

those in authority. 27% tied such behavior to patient deaths!

Various studies have demonstrated a sharp decline in efficiency and effectiveness when employees were treated with incivility. They have shown that “the number one characteristic associated with an executive’s failure is an insensitive, abrasive or bullying style.” Such executives may think that rudeness and bullying are signs of power; in fact, these are the very qualities that undermine the success of those executives. They have not understood that a shepherd needs to be strong, but also gentle and sensitive to the needs and feelings of others.

What is true in hospitals and industry is even truer in religious institutions. When the shepherds, whether rabbinic or lay, serve the community with selflessness, idealism and sensitivity—the result is a harmonious community where everyone feels valued and respected. When the shepherds, whether rabbinic or lay, behave in a callous and bullying manner—the community becomes demoralized. When the community feels that the shepherds are more interested in their own power than in the needs of the people, the community begins to unravel. Demoralized people stray away, lose confidence, stop attending, and stop contributing. Without genuinely devoted shepherds, “the flock of the Lord” loses direction.

In responding to Moses’ request, God replied: “Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is spirit, and lay your hand upon him….and you shall put of your honor upon him so that all the congregation of the children of Israel may hearken” (27:18-20).

The Me’am Lo’ez, the classic Ladino biblical commentary, explains that Joshua was a man “of spirit,” a man who understood the needs and sensitivities of each person. “And I [God] know that he is a man in whom the spirit resides, a spirit of wisdom and understanding, thoughtfulness and strength, fear of God and spirit of prophecy.” Joshua would be the successor to Moses because Joshua had the qualities of a genuine shepherd. He was strong and was also considerate of each person. He put the interests of the public before his own personal interests. He was not one who hungered for, or abused, power.

In asking Moses to transfer authority to Joshua, God wanted the public to witness the smooth transition of leadership to Joshua. The people needed to be assured that they would be led by a true and good shepherd, someone endowed with the spirit of God.

Selfless, devoted and talented shepherds are not easy to find. But without them, we are lost.

Angel for Shabbat