

... And do not let the Congregation of God be like a flock, which has no shepherd." [Bamidbar 27:17]

God has told Moshe that he will not lead the Jewish People into the Land of Israel. Though he led our people for forty years, he will nevertheless die in the wilderness. At this point, another leader might have prayed for many things. But Moshe, in one of the few times in the Torah where he actually initiates the conversation with God, rather than the reverse, asks the Holy One to appoint a new leader, to be certain that someone remains to guide the people. Moses' priority was to ensure that the community had a leader. The Midrash notes that this offers us a glimpse into the greatness of the righteous -- they set aside their own needs and look out for those of the congregation, even when they are about to die.

In his request, Moshe compares leaders to shepherds. The Sfas Emes (Rabbi Y.L. Alter, 2nd Gerer Rebbe and Hasidic leader in 19th century Poland) writes that although our true shepherd is God, (think "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" [Psalm 23:1]) it is nonetheless crucial that we also have a human guide, a person to show us what God wants from us, through instruction and -- even more important -- through action. In the eyes of the Sfas Emes, this is not a question of needing an intermediary to Heaven. It is about the need for human guidance in the quest to become Godly.

This is a wonderful message for those of us in congregational setting. All of us have the capacity for leadership. Sometimes, though, it takes time to find the right task. And sometimes, like Moshe, we do not see the results of our labors. Nevertheless, keeping this idea in mind can transform our efforts for a Holy Congregation into truly Holy Work and remind us why we are part of a shul.

This is an especially cogent message during the Three Weeks, when we mourn a time when human leadership failed and people did not see their leadership (or even participation) efforts in a spiritual sense. Let us all rededicate ourselves *L'shem Shamayim*, that our efforts for the community be for the Sake of Heaven, and that we all find a place to use the gifts endowed to us by Hashem for the sake of a community. Sometimes we have to be followers and sheep, but sometimes, we can all be shepherds as well!

Shabbat Shalom.

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