

## Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

BAMIDBAR

NASO

BEHAALOTECHA

SHELACH

KORACH

CHUKKAT

BALAK

PINCHAS

MATOT

MASSEI

# PINCHAS

## PUSHING BUT

## NOT TOO FAR

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**The** Torah is the ultimate opus on leadership. Though some portray our heroes as angelic, through a simple reading of the Torah it is immediately clear that the majority of **our biblical role models are not superhuman, but rather super humans. They are human beings, with all the burdens and benefits that this entails.** The deliverer of this manuscript, Moses, is seen as the greatest leader, unparalleled in his abilities and leadership style: ‘Never in Israel has there arisen another like Moses.’<sup>1</sup> Of him and his teachings, generations of Jews have stated in jubilation and awe that: Moses is truth and his Torah is true. And in one short passage at the heart of this week’s *parasha*, we get an inkling as to why this is indeed a fact.

**When** Moses is told that he will not lead the Jewish people into the Promised Land due to his mistakes at the time that he

struck the rock rather than speaking to it, his first response is to ask God ‘to appoint a man over the assembly that will go out before them and come in before them, that will take them out and bring them in; and not let the assembly of God be like sheep without a shepherd’.<sup>2</sup> **Moses, who experienced the birth of the Jewish nation, who led them out of Egypt to receive the Torah, and through the barren wilderness for decades with selfless dedication, is told that he will not continue with them on the odyssey into their homeland.**

**His** response is mind-boggling and inspiring, and demonstrates his greatness as a leader and a human being. We hear not one complaint, nor one question relating to himself - his first thought is who will carry them forwards? Who will continue what he has started? Remembering the Golden Calf

that was built the last time he was not around, for only forty days, Moses is worried that his nation will be like sheep without a shepherd. For Moses, leadership is about the people, not the leader. This value lives on within other leaders of our nation. A visit to the home of David Ben-Gurion in Sde Boker, or to that of Menachem Begin in Tel Aviv, shows their humility, emphasising what it means to live for your people, and not for yourself.

**Notwithstanding** the inspiring nature of his response to God, the phrasing of Moses’ actual question is strange. Why does Moses ask for a leader who would ‘go out before them and come in before them...take them out and bring them in?’ If one goes out before the people, surely it means that he is taking them out? And if one comes in before them, surely that implies that he is bringing them in? If so, this

request seems repetitive. Rather than being superfluous, however, these details actually reveal another feature of the extraordinary level of Moses' leadership.

**As** Moses stated, the Jewish people need a leader who will go out before them and come in before them, someone who will address problems and deal with them, someone who will lead ahead, set the bar high and create space for the people to rise to the challenge. **Sometimes, however, the bar can be set so high that the leader goes too far, too fast, and grows beyond the people, making himself no longer relevant to their particular needs.**

**This** is where a profound level of tolerance and awareness is essential for the leader to be effective. Otherwise, he will turn around after leading the way and find that he has left the people far behind.<sup>3</sup> For such a leader, his ideals may be right but his timing is wrong. This is why Moses qualifies his statement by saying that the leader needs to 'take them out and bring them in'. Rashi explains that Moses' request distinguishes him from other kings, who would sit in their homes and send their armies out to battle.<sup>4</sup>

**The** fine balance between pushing and pulling, between setting a bar high enough to effectively challenge and stretch the people, on the one hand, and ensuring that the goal is achievable on the other hand, is incumbent upon every leader. Not only is it essential for our leaders, including teachers, community leaders and parents,

but it is also incumbent on each and every one of us - when leading ourselves.

**As** Jewish people and human beings, it is upon us to constantly reassess our goals and how we would like to achieve them. This is done by pushing ourselves - but not beyond our limits. We see examples of Moses' style of leadership in the Israeli army, where the commander leads from the front, and fights together with his troops. Likewise, we see a similar leadership style within almost every successful sports team, where the captain leads from within the team rather than from a distance.

**This** is the profound message of Moses in his humble request for a new leader, and each one of us can heed this message as we continue to challenge ourselves with achievable goals.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 34:10. <sup>2</sup> Numbers 27:16-17.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, 'Pinchas (5771),' in *Covenant and Conversation*.

<sup>4</sup> Rashi on Numbers 27:17.

#### Parasha Fact:

The second census in the desert is taken. This is done only under instruction from God, as there is an injunction against counting Jews. If one must count, one should do so in multiples.

שבת שלום



#### Next week in Matot:

*The Land of Israel is an inheritance that the Children of Israel have been awaiting for four hundred years. During that time, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were wanderers, the Children of Israel were enslaved in Egypt, and subsequently they spend forty years wandering the desert - all for the sake of entering the land. Now, the Children of Israel are about to finally receive that which they have been promised. They are about to fulfil their destiny and realise their dream. They are right outside the land! Why then, at this climactic moment in history, do Reuben and Gad choose to declare their desire to live outside the land? Why do they want to forsake their right to their homeland?*